

# 6 Personal learning environments and personal learning networks for language teachers' professional development

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## Abstract

The emergence of Web 2.0 has created diverse opportunities for continuing professional development in the area of language teaching. This article begins by presenting how the pedagogical model implemented in an online postgraduate programme integrates the Personal Learning Environment and Personal Learning Network (PLE and PLN) concept and practice to support students' learning. Furthermore, it provides two case studies from the students of the programme on the integration of the PLE and PLN concept in their own settings as well as its effects on their professional development. The first case study describes how the PLE and PLN concept has become part of the instructional strategy of the teacher and discusses the outcomes of its implementation. The second case study deals with how the PLE and PLN concept facilitated the professional networking activities of the teacher and how this has affected teaching practices. The two case studies demonstrate diverse ways as to how teachers can use PLEs and PLNs for supporting their own as well as their students' learning, and for creating professional development opportunities within their

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own teaching and educational contexts. The two case studies also demonstrate the potential of PLEs and PLNs for supporting teachers' professional development beyond a formal training programme.

**Keywords: teacher professional development, personal learning environment, online postgraduate programme, case study.**

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## 1. Introduction

Rapid advancement of technologies and the emergence of Web 2.0 in the last decades have created new and diverse opportunities for continuing professional development in the area of language teaching.

This chapter focuses on the notion and practice of PLEs and PLNs and their impact on the experience of language teachers studying for a postgraduate professional development programme; the Master of Arts in Digital Technologies for Language Teaching (MA in DTLT), University of Nottingham, UK.

PLEs (Attwell, 2007) and PLNs (Drexler, 2010) are developing concepts which emerge from the idea that learning occurs in different online contexts due to ubiquitous computing and web 2.0 technologies. They emphasise the continuing character of learning and the central role of the individuals in taking responsibility and organising their own learning activities.

The educational context which hosts our present discussion not only acknowledges the importance of students' PLEs and PLNs for their learning and professional development, it also engulfs students' PLEs and PLNs in its pedagogical model (Goria & Konstantinidis, 2017; Konstantinidis & Goria, 2016).

This study addresses the ways in which the personalised learning supported by PLEs and PLNs affects the development of our students as learners as well as professionals.

After a brief review of the current literature around the notion of PLEs and PLNs, our chapter will demonstrate how it is introduced to the student-teachers of the MA in DTLT and promoted with practice throughout the duration of the programme.

Second, it will present and discuss two case studies from the students of the programme on the implementation of the PLE and PLN concept and its effects on their own professional development. In the first case study, it is described how the concept has become part of the instructional strategy of the teacher. The outcomes of its implementation are briefly discussed. The second case study deals with how PLEs and PLNs have facilitated the professional and pedagogical networking activities of the teacher and how they have affected the teaching practices. In both case studies, our students reflect on the impact of the notion and practice around PLEs and PLNs on their professional development as teachers.

The last section of the chapter places the outcomes of the case studies within the relevant literature and discusses the potential of PLEs and PLNs for supporting teachers in formal and informal learning as well as in professional development activities.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Context**

Our study is located within the context of the MA in DTLT; a two-year part-time distance learning programme that targets qualified teachers interested in developing their theoretical and practical expertise in digital technologies with a specific focus on the learning and teaching of foreign languages.

The programme's pedagogical model is articulated around principles of cognitive and experiential approaches to course design (Toohey, 1999), which consider social interaction and personal experience essential for constructing knowledge.

The result is a highly participatory pedagogical model which requires an equally highly engaged community within which our learners participate.

Konstantinidis and Gorla (2016) advance a model for a community of distance learners which combines *teaching, social, and cognitive* presences of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999) with *cohesion, identity, and creativity* of the Community Indicator Framework (CIF) (Galley, Conole, & Alevizou, 2014), respectively. Most significantly, the proposed model places CIF's *participation* at the centre of the learning experience<sup>5</sup>.

In its original formulations, CoI is concerned with formal learning in closed learning communities, whereas CIF pertains to informal learning in open communities. Thus, the combination of these two frameworks is motivated by the drive to build a learning community that on the one hand is situated within the parameters of an institutionally based formal education programme, the MA in DTLT, and on the other hand, it operates on the basis of principles of open learning. With this in mind, PLEs and PLNs are promoted as an approach to prioritise open learning and nurture an open community of learners.

## 2.2. PLEs and PLNs and their integration in the programme

In our work, PLEs are the space within which learning takes place with all the resources utilised within that space. As for PLNs, they highlight the central role of personal and professional connections of the individual through social media, digital tools, and other communication media, including offline ones. Thus, PLEs provide the structure – space and technologies – for developing

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5. To summarise, CoI proposes that learning happens at the intersection between teaching presence (the design and facilitation of the educational experience), cognitive presence (the extent that participants are in position to construct meaning through communication), and social presence (participants' ability to project their socioemotional traits into the community). CIF identifies the four ingredients of an affective community learning experience, namely: "participation (the ways in which individuals engage in activity), cohesion (the ties between individuals and the community as a whole), identity (how individuals perceive the community and their place within it), and creative capability (the ability of the community to create shared artefacts and knowledge)" (Galley et al., 2014, p. 379).

people's PLNs and communities (Steeple & Jones, 2002 as cited in Drexler, 2010, p. 370). Through PLEs and PLNs, our programme promotes an approach to learning that "is not about individuals as much as it is about networks, sharing, and creating" (Laakkonen, 2011, p. 24).

Furthermore, PLEs and PLNs meet the needs of professionals as they bring together different types of learning; typically informal learning, formal learning, professional learning, and learning from the home (Attwell, 2007). They provide personalised working spaces that enable "multidirectional learning in which the students can use all the available resources and people on the internet" (Pérez Cascante, Salinas, & Marín, 2016, p. 54).

Within the MA in DTLT, PLEs and PLNs are introduced in phases in line with the three-level framework proposed by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012). Phase 1 focusses on personal productivity; in Phase 2, the learners transform their learning spaces from personal to social; in Phase 3, the learners reflect on the outcomes of the previous phases and customise them around their own learning goals. An additional Phase 4, the 'go public' phase (Gorla & Konstantinidis, 2017), is introduced for the learners to develop their spaces from social to globally social. Throughout all phases, the learners reflect on and graphically represent their spaces and connections, they categorise their tools and connections according to their purpose and functions, and position and reposition themselves inside their spaces as users as well as contributors.

Through our PLE and PLN based approach, our community of learners is extended beyond the boundaries of our programme to include our learners' professional and personal experiences. In a participatory-pedagogy fashion (Andersen & Ponti, 2014; Siemens, 2008), knowledge constructed outside our programme is brought into the programme via our learners' PLEs and PLNs, affecting the overall learning experience.

In the next section, we outline some outcomes of our implementation of this approach.

### **3. Results**

A desired outcome of our practice around PLEs and PLNs briefly outlined above is increased awareness of the services, tools, and connections that support learning and of their influence on our students' experience directly (Goria & Konstantinidis, 2017) as well as indirectly on their students' experience (Goria, 2016). In the following two sections, two case studies are presented, as evidence of the impact of our PLE and PLN approach on two of our learners' professional practices.

#### **3.1. Case study of integration of PLEs in instruction**

In the section below, one of our students and co-author of this chapter reports on his methods for integrating the PLE concept in teaching. He discusses how the integration transformed his practice and created new opportunities for professional development.

##### *3.1.1. Case study context*

Our student has an information technology background and works as a computer-assisted language learning instructor at the Faculty of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) at Mahidol University, Thailand. His students study for the completion of a degree in ICT, have high technological skills, and their English language level ranges from lower intermediate to advanced. The number of students in his classes is usually between twenty and thirty. As part of this degree in ICT, he teaches 18-week modules which mainly focus on reading and writing skills.

##### *3.1.2. Description of the instructional methods*

The PLE concept is introduced from the first week of each course that he teaches. He starts the course by posing the simple question: *What is an environment?*, to ensure that students understand the meaning of the word 'environment' and to prepare the class for the following activities. The class collectively produces

definitions for an environment, a learning environment, and a PLE. He then pairs the students randomly and asks them to list the things around them that help them learn. Students usually start reporting very basic tools, such as books, pens, and so on, but soon they mention more sophisticated tools and technologies, such as computer devices, the internet, websites, applications, and social networks.

Next, students are tasked with drawing their PLE as a diagram, taking a photo of their PLE with their mobile phones and sharing their work using a class instant messaging group. The photos are then shared on a screen while different aspects of the PLEs are discussed within the class, focussing on the features that people have in common and those that are unique to some PLEs. In this way, the students are supported in visualising their own PLE and gradually guided to become aware of the instruments that they use.

The teacher also asks students to add aspects of their PLEs into a shared online mind map, as a further exercise to be completed outside of the classroom and to help students learn from each other and develop their own PLE over the duration of the course. The content of a PLE varies from student to student, reflecting the individual differences in language learners. Facebook, Wikipedia, and specific YouTube channels related to course content or English grammar appear regularly, and online grammar checking and plagiarism detection tools are common, as well as more specialised online computer programming and developing communities such as Github and StackOverflow.

### *3.1.3. How the integration of the PLEs impacted upon the teaching process*

The courses relevant to this study are taught by four instructors who observe and reflect upon how the PLEs are developed and interpreted by the students, leading to implementing changes to the PLE assignment and concept each time the syllabus is reviewed. Notes, which form the basis of observations and reflections, are made by the instructors to a shared Google Docs. The integration of the PLEs brought several favourable changes into the overall teaching process. Compared to previous deliveries of the course, the students

were given more autonomy in their learning; for example, they became more meticulous with their assignments and were more likely to use proofreading tools or other resources to check their work rather than rely on their instructors.

The utilisation of the PLE by students also facilitated the peer review process and collaboration between the students. It could be argued that the PLEs enabled the students to visualise and use the tools and people around them, whilst also developing their own independence. What is more, due to the introduction of the PLEs, the types and aims of assessment were transformed and became more authentic and relevant to the students. Whilst previous exam questions had been graded to a specific standard of grammar, the new assignment tasks required students to reflect on their use of their own PLE or describe how they might use aspects of it to support the writing process and create their own language learning environment based on their own experiences and interests.

### *3.1.4. The impact on professional development as a teacher*

Besides directly impacting the teaching process and the role of the teacher, the PLE concept had several profound effects on the teacher's professional development.

Before being introduced to the concept of the PLE, he had his own favourite tools, methods, and strategies for learning. By becoming cognisant of the concept and by giving it a formal name, he was able to make it part of his teaching practice, and as a result his teaching practice improved. By helping his students construct their own PLE, he further improved his relationship with each student and this enabled him to become familiar with their different interests and approaches to learning. Moreover, through the process of PLE development that he introduced, he learned from his students as he became aware of a number of new learning resources, websites, and applications. On a more personal level and as a language learner himself, he viewed the development of a PLE as the most effective way of learning a new language and achieving proficiency. Lastly, he noticed that the successful outcomes of his practice motivated his colleagues to adopt PLEs in their own lesson.

### **3.2. Case study of use of online communities as part of the PLN**

In the following paragraphs, another student of the MA in DTLT and co-author in this paper reports on how developing her PLN to include online teaching communities has helped her find information and elaborate ideas relevant to her daily teaching, expand her professional network, find potential partners for developing pedagogical projects, enrich her teaching practices, and hone her teaching skills. Her PLE/PLN experience as learner of the programme has helped her develop competencies that have transformed her professional practice.

#### *3.2.1. Case study context*

Our student is an English language teacher in a primary school in Ankara, Turkey. After embracing the notion and practice of PLEs and PLNs as a student of the MA in DTLT, she has been regularly using online social and professional networks such as eTwinning, Facebook, and EBA, a network for teachers and students in Turkey, for searching information, staying up-to-date, finding partners for pedagogical projects, and taking part in discussions about educational issues.

She currently utilises each of the aforementioned three online communities in different ways in order to achieve her goals and meet her needs as a teacher. She monitors daily nearly twenty Facebook groups related to education and language learning and accesses EBA twice a week to explore the affordances of the platform, search resources, watch other teachers' videos about their curriculum practices, as well as read the comments and discussions related to these videos.

In sharp contrast with Facebook and EBA, she uses eTwinning only as a tool to find partners for developing exchange projects. She enters the eTwinning platform frequently at the beginning of the school season to search for potential partners or to join existing projects. However, past the initial search for partners, she logs into the platform only occasionally and mainly for administrative purposes, news and updates.

*3.2.2. The impact on professional development as a teacher*

By including these three online communities into her PLN, she is able to enrich her daily teaching in a number of ways and create opportunities for professional development. Her claim is that, through her PLN, she finds lesson plans that have been tested and recommended by other teachers in the field and reads about the challenges that might emerge on implementation and how more experienced teachers address these challenges. This, as she claims, eases the implementation process by decreasing the effort and time needed to organise classroom activities.

The PLE and PLN practice has provided her with the opportunity to expand her professional network, communicate with teachers across Europe interested in developing telecollaborative projects, and become partner in a few telecollaborative projects. Her experience helped her to apply a practical understanding of the theoretical knowledge that she gained through her participation in the MA in DTLT programme on a variety of issues related to organising telecollaborative projects, such as partner selection, partner-to-partner communication and rapport building, overcoming problems, caring for students' personal needs, devising engaging and effective activities. What is more, her involvement in the design and development of telecollaborative projects helped her strengthen her ICT, communication, and project management skills, while she also became more proficient in creating a stimulating environment for project-based learning for her students.

## **4. Discussion**

The two case studies demonstrate ways in which teachers can use PLEs/PLNs for supporting their own and their students' learning, as well as for creating professional development opportunities within their own teaching and educational contexts. In agreement with the literature concerned with PLEs and PLNs, our case studies describe how these are used for: accessing resources suitable for the specific needs of the user (Pérez Cascante et al., 2016); increasing students' motivation (Dabbagh, Kitsantas, Freih, & Fake, 2015); searching,

aggregating, creating, and sharing content (Saadatmand & Kumpulainen, 2013); encouraging students to make their learning personally relevant; increasing students' collaboration and independence (Castañeda & Soto, 2010); assisting students in reflecting on the learning process (Arrufat & Sánchez, 2012); and engaging in online communities (Saadatmand & Kumpulainen, 2013).

However, what differentiates our two case studies is that they describe how the PLE and PLN concept has been employed by teachers as a medium for professional development beyond the formal education programme with which they were involved. This demonstrated how the PLE and PLN concept realises its true potential for supporting lifelong learning and continuous professional development (Attwell, 2007). By suggesting a new way of understanding and using digital technologies and social media for learning, the PLE and PLN concept recognises the role of the individuals in organising their own learning, it corroborates the continuity character of learning, and seeks to provide the tools and methods for supporting such learning. PLEs and PLNs can equally support teachers who want to enhance their daily teaching practices, expand their professional network, or create their own professional development opportunities. Moreover, the PLE and PLN concept also recognises that learning occurs in diverse contexts and is not attributable to a single educational source. As such, PLEs and PLNs support learning both within and beyond formal education.

## 5. Conclusions

In this chapter, we have presented how the pedagogical model implemented within the MA in DTLT programme introduces our students to the concept and practice of PLEs and PLNs. Two case studies have been reported to demonstrate the impact of our model on the professional development of our students in their own educational settings. The case studies show the potential of PLEs and PLNs for supporting teachers both in their daily practice and in creating their own professional development opportunities beyond a formal training programme. Future research will explore the methods for language teachers to extend

students' utilisation of PLEs and PLNs beyond classroom instructions, aiming at strengthening the sustainability and transferability of the practice.

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**Professional development in CALL: a selection of papers**

**Edited by Christina Nicole Giannikas, Elis Kakoulli Constantinou, and Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous**

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