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To cite this article: Michael Stephens, Helen Partridge, Kate Davis & Margaret Snyder (2021): The Strategic, Curious & Skeptical Learner : Australian Public Librarians and Professional Learning Experiences, Public Library Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/01616846.2021.1893114](https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2021.1893114)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2021.1893114>



Published online: 28 Feb 2021.



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The Strategic, Curious & Skeptical Learner : Australian Public Librarians and Professional Learning Experiences

Michael Stephens^a, Helen Partridge^b, Kate Davis^c, and Margaret Snyder^a

^aSan Jose State University, San Jose, USA; ^bDeakin University, Geelong, Australia; ^cCouncil of Australian University Librarians, Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

This study used narrative inquiry to investigate the experiences of Australian public librarians with professional learning and development. Twelve librarians currently working in public libraries in Australia were interviewed. The interviews revealed stories that depicted the real experiences of professional learning for the librarians. These stories are represented in this paper via two components: five critical insights; and three personas. The five critical insights include: (i) there is not enough professional learning experiences (PLE) or learning culture in their library; (ii) PLE must be sought out personally and a major portion of PLE has to happen on their own time; (iii) PLE is primarily found online, and that utilizing social media is a crucial way to find PLE opportunities; and (iv) PLE opportunities are wanted. The three personas were articulated to best typify the different experiences of the Australian public librarians: the Strategic Learner, the Curious Ad Hoc Learner, and the Skeptical Learner. The study's findings have implications for how public libraries in Australia can support and enable a culture of professional learning and development.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received September 2020
Accepted February 2021

KEYWORDS

Narrative inquiry; public librarians; professional development; professional learning experiences; Australian librarians; public libraries; personas

Introduction

In the constantly evolving field of librarianship, continuous learning is vital for staying up-to-date, connecting with other professionals, and discovering new opportunities. The Australian Library and Information Association, the peak body for the sector nationally, states that all library and information science (LIS) professionals “have a personal responsibility to commit to professional development and career-long learning” (Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 2019, para, 4) and that all LIS employers as well as ALIA itself, have “a responsibility to provide opportunities which enable library and information professionals to expand their knowledge and skills” (Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 2019, para 4).

The need for professional development and career long learning of LIS professionals is especially true in the context of public libraries. As outlined in

the *Public Library Manifesto* by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the public library is “a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women” (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) 1994, para 3). The world of public libraries is however dynamic, with technology having a massive impact on how humans share and create knowledge, and the need to provide a broad and diverse array of services and programs to meet the change and nuances needs of individuals and communities, in the context of ever tighten budgets. It is essential therefore that the public librarian “cannot be left behind, to be rendered irrelevant” (Hallam 2009, 20) and that they continue to learn and ensure they have the skills, knowledge to confidently respond to the needs of future practice.

So much of what librarians do to learn for professional positions can be defined as an experience. It might be going to a conference, participating in a MOOC or large-scale learning online, watching TED Talks, attending webinars, etc. If we call them professional learning experiences (PLEs), that is a way to describe the events contributing to a constructivist point of view in which the learner is always building a frame of reference and point of view for professional practice. This paper outlines a research project that investigates the experiences of public librarians with professional learning and development. Using narrative inquiry and the development of personas, this research can serve as a basis for professional discussion and debate on the key issues and opportunities for encouraging and enabling professional learning culture and practice within Australia’s public library workforce. The paper begins with a brief review of relevant literature before providing an overview of the research approach and the personas created from stories regarding the PLEs of public librarians in Australia. The paper concludes by discussing the key implications of the study and identifying areas of further research.

Literature review

The skill and knowledge needed by library and information science (LIS) professionals in Australia, and the impact this has on education and continuing professional development, has been well researched (Kennan et al. 2008; Pamment 2008; Partridge et al. 2011, 2010; Kennan et al, 2006). Library staff development was one of several topics considered as part of the neXus2 study undertaken by Hallam (2008). The neXus2 project was funded by the Australian Library and Information Association and National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA). As part of the project, 191 senior managers from libraries across Australia (i.e., academic, public, special, school, academic) completed an online questionnaire exploring a whole of library perspective to topics such as staff development. The

project observed that larger organizations, such as academic libraries and those involved in consortium, are better placed to support training and professional development, with smaller libraries facing greater challenges in terms of strategic planning, financial resources and policy development. The project also observed that in the sector there were:

“pockets of good practice, where there is keen awareness that continuing professional development has a strategic value that can underpin the success of a library to face the challenges of a dynamic and ever-changing professional development. There are also, however, some areas of concern, where libraries are seeming operating almost in a vacuum, failing to plan for the future, perhaps in the belief that in the immediate context, the pace of change is slow, with little impact on staff knowledge and skills”. (Hallam 2009, 20)

Within the Australian public library context specifically, one of the most substantive programs of work exploring workforce skills, knowledge, and professional development was undertaken from 2006 to 2014 in collaboration by the Public Libraries Victoria Network and the State Library Victoria. Initial findings and insights from this program of work was provided in the report *Workforce Sustainability and Leadership: Survey Analysis, and Planning* (Considine, Jakubauskas, and Oliver 2008). Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques and involving practitioners from across the state’s public library network, three types of workplace skills were delineated: cognitive (or Foundational), technical (or Professional), and Behavioral skills. The report also provided recommendations related to standardizing position descriptions, performance management, succession planning, and career development.

Building on this work is the report *Victorian Public Libraries: Out Future, Our Skills* (Hallam 2014) that outlines the next phase of work completed between 2011 and 2014 to develop a framework articulating the core competences required by the public library workforce in the twenty first century. Drawing from the 47 public library services in the state of Victoria the framework was developed via insights obtained from the 1334 library staff and 77 managers who responded to an online questionnaire, as well as the 133 library staff who participated in a focus group. The work showed that there was strong awareness that new skills sets will be required for future practice and that it is critical for the sector to adopt a coordinated approach to training and development. The work also revealed that having a high proportion of part time or casual staff lead to challenges in achieving the goal of ensuring all staff are well trained and engaged.

Overall the program of work undertaken by the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network has shown the strong commitment by Victoria’s public library sector to prepare for the future. Victoria’s “public libraries have the opportunity to build a culture learning and development to

ensure that members of staff are well trained and have the right experience to confidently deal with the challenges ahead” (Hallam 2014, 4).

In addition to this program of work two other studies provide insights into professional development and the Australian public library workforce. Haines and Calvert (2009) investigated the issues faced by public library staff in rural South Australia. They used a mixed methods approach, combining interviews with 31 library staff, and a questionnaire completed by 39 staff. Their work showed that professional development was regarded as important for the knowledge obtained and for the networking opportunities. The main issues rural public library staff faced in engaging with professional development was distance, time and cost.

Stephens and Cheetham (2012a, 2012b), as part of the CAVAL Visiting Scholar program, investigated the implementation of the Learning 2.0 programme in Australia in general and at the CityLibraries Townsville as a case study. Learning 2.0, also known as 23 Things, has been replicated across the world as a way of helping staff learn about emerging social and mobile technology and as a means of moving libraries forward as a learning organization. For those who participated in the programme in Australia, there was an emphasis on perceived personal change, openness to emerging technology and a willingness to explore. The case study at Townsville provided further support for the programme creating positive change in regard to technology.

The research conducted to date has provided a strong foundation to understand the core skills and knowledge required by public library workforce into the future, with evidence-based recommendations on training needs and strategies to prepare the workforce of the future. The research outlined in this paper builds upon this foundation to investigate how Australia’s public librarians experience professional development.

Methods

This research used narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) to explore the experience of professional learning by librarians in Australia’s public library sector. All human experience can be expressed in the form of a narrative or story (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). As Connelly and Clandinin (2006, 37) pointed out: “Story . . . is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful”. Stories or narratives help people to preserve memories, engage in reflection, connect to the past and the present and imagine future (Kramp 2004). As an approach to research, narrative inquiry therefore provides an effective way to undertake a “systematic study of personal experiences and meaning” (Riesman 1993, 70).

Participants

The research sample consisted of twelve (12) librarians currently working in an Australian public library setting. There is no definitive sample size for undertaking narrative inquiry research. In a review of 10 narrative inquiry studies, Guetterman (2015) noted that the sample size ranged from 1 to 54, with a mean sample size of 18. Guetterman concluded that when considering sample size researchers need to move beyond ‘how many’ to address the questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’. The number of participants in the study was determined based upon the nature of the research question, the research team’s past experience in qualitative research and saturation (e.g. the point when no new insights were forthcoming).

The sample comprised 12 females that were aged between 28 and 60 years. The study’s participants worked in a variety of different public library roles and represented those working in large, urban locations, and smaller, rural libraries. Some were early career librarians recently matriculated while others had been in the field for some time. Background experience ranged from careers in other fields such as education or social work to time spent in other parts of the world. Participants were recruited by convenience and purposive sampling. Recruitment messages were posted via Twitter and a call for participation was posted to e-mail lists of the Australian Library and Information Association. As the lead institution, human ethics approval was obtained by the Institutional Review Board of San Jose State University.

Data collection and analysis

Each participant took part in a 30 to 60-min interview. The interviews were all conducted by one member of the research team. In developing the interview protocol one of the challenges encountered was determining the best way to orient participants to what the interview was about. It was recognized that many terms can be used to describe librarians engaging in learning for work and professional practice, including but not limited to continue professional education, continuing professional development, professional learning, professional development, professional education, workplace training. The interview guide used language (i.e., professional learning and development) that was broad and inclusive, as well as being a familiar term to public librarians related to learning for their jobs. In addition, to help orient that participants the interview commenced with the following statement: “Historically, public librarians and library personnel have pursued opportunities for professional learning experiences such as reading professional literature, attending in-service days and conferences. Now we have webinars and other technologically focused opportunities for learning offering more channels for development. This research explores how public librarians learn for their jobs.”

Participants were asked one central open-ended question focused on PLEs: “I would like to hear about your experiences with professional learning and development in your public library job. You can tell your story in any way you feel comfortable, perhaps beginning with a bit about your background, the work you do, and what you do to keep learning in your job.” This interview question was designed intentionally to be an invitation to each participant to construct a narrative detailing particularity of their experience and context (Kramp 2004). The question also includes the phrase “... and development” because development is a familiar term to public librarians related to learning for their jobs. The researcher then followed a strategy of not asking any further questions and simply demonstrating non-verbal encouragement (Kramp 2004). For the few participants that slowed down or stopped talking, the researcher would reiterate parts of the central question to keep the narrative going. Only immanent questions were asked if absolutely necessary, and the focus unequivocally remained on allowing the participant to tell their story in their own words (Kramp 2004). This open-ended, semi-structured approach allowed participants to dictate the flow of an honest, sincere narrative. The researcher kept the interviews as anonymous as possible to ensure that privacy was maintained and to help ensure that the participant felt as comfortable as possible and open to sharing a candid account of their personal experience with professional learning in Australian public libraries.

Interview data were collected via the web conferencing software Zoom. All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. One member of the project team took the lead in the coding of the interviews and overall analysis, with the other project team members providing critical commentary. There is no singular approach or framework for the analysis of narratives. McLeod and Balamoutsou (2001, 130) pointed out that each researcher “must create his or her own method” that best aligns with the study context and design.

This study used descriptive content analysis (Neuendorf 2002), with emphasis on exploring recurring themes in the stories told by the participants. The transcripts were read and re-read with a focus on both the content of the narrative (the told) and the structure of the narrative (the telling) (Josselson 2011). Each topic covered by the participant in her story was noted with descriptive codes in a document. The interviewer’s notes for each interview were also examined as part of the process.

Following Clandinin and Connelly (2000) each narrative was considered from three lenses: (i) Interaction – the narrative is analyzed for both the personal experiences of the participant and their interactions with other people; (ii) Continuity – the narrative is analyzed for the past and present actions of the participant as those actions are likely to occur in the future; and (iii) Situation – the narrative is analyzed by looking for specific

locations or places that given meaning to the narrative. After each participants story was critically considered and understood, cross-case analysis was undertaken to discover similarities, differences, and patterns across the narratives.

Developing the personas

To present the salient themes and participant narratives, the researchers chose to explore the findings as personas. Often used in the field of usability user experience, developing personas from the narrative interview data provides a compelling way for public library administrators and trainers to understand librarians' learning. The researchers utilized the steps to create personas described on the United States Usability resources web site (<https://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/personas.html>). The steps to persona creation include conducting user research, identify themes and common elements of the research, brainstorm the potential personas, refine the personas, and make them realistic (Personas 2021).

The researchers exchanged ideas and conferred about the personas throughout the analysis phase. There were constant comparisons and considerations of the 12 participants' interview transcripts and recordings and the interviewer's notes. The personas were distilled down to represent the unique needs and behaviors of the learners. Descriptions and insights about the personas are shared in the findings and discussion below. Note: Individual quotes pulled from the twelve interviews will be attributed to anonymized code names P1 through P12. As this is an exploratory study of 12 participants, it is an interpretive and qualitative study. The personas depict the collective experiences of the participants in regard to the phenomena of PLEs. Participants will see different parts of their experiences in the different personas. It is not intended that one participant's narrative will be allocated to one persona.

Findings

The interviews revealed the stories of the real experiences of professional learning for 12 librarians currently working in the Australian public library sector. These stories are represented here via two components: (i) five critical insights; and (ii) 3 personas.

The four critical insights depict the collective experience that emerged in these distinct narratives of Australian public librarians. They include:

- (1) there is not enough PLE or learning culture in their library,
- (2) PLE must be sought out personally and a major portion of PLE has to happen on their own time,

- (3) PLE is primarily found online, and that utilizing social media is a crucial way to find PLE opportunities.
- (4) PLE opportunities are wanted.

One participant stated: librarianship means “being challenged to continually try something new and different and to be open to learning at all times.” (P12) This thirst for knowledge, new skills, and improved systems, is what underlies all the narratives, even the stories of those who are disenchanting by the profession as they feel disenfranchised by their library’s staff, management, administration, and governance. In order to bring these different personal narratives to life and represent the trends in the research findings, we identified three personas that best typify the different experiences of these Australian public librarians: the Strategic Learner, the Curious Ad Hoc Learner, and the Skeptical Learner.

The strategic learner

The **Strategic Learner** is highly motivated about professional learning and prioritizes it as integral to their current role and planned future roles in the information profession. One participant described her approach and it highlights some of the key elements of this persona:

“There’s a bit of a sort of bleeding edge to what’s coming out. How can we use it? We need to have a play with it and sort of see if we can integrate it into what we do, or are we just gonna leave it and go on to the next thing. And that was something that I probably did more of in the past. Whereas I think now I’m more strategic and directed about the things that I explore. I will be looking for things that are going to be more directly relevant to the types of work that I’m doing at the moment, or that I’m looking to do in near future.” (P10)

The Strategic Learner is also proactive, looking for learning opportunities to meet goals and directly requesting support for them:

“ . . . So I just started asking for stuff. I’d say: can I go to this, could I do this, I need to do a photography course because I’m the social media person. I need to go to this conference, . . . so yeah, so I just started asking and I actually got to do quite a lot of professional development in that space, because I asked for it. So these things were not offered to me. I found opportunities for myself to do. And. And then I asked for it. So I think that was a big difference from what I see and hear from other public library staff is they sort of wait for what’s offered or what comes out in a bulk email of courses.” (P01)

The Strategic Learner gains invaluable skills and experiences on the job, believing that “every day becomes a professional learning experience” when working at the public library. (P11) The Strategic Learner is not only committed to development through on the job learning, outside of work these librarians seek out as one participant emphasizes, “every possible resource for

learning,” (P3) in person, online, and even outside the Library and Information Science (LIS) field.

The Strategic Learner is extremely flexible about what they consider to be a professional learning experience, such as connecting with the community (P3), learning more about local governance and the council works through experience (P10), reading articles from different disciplines (P4, P12), connecting informally with other professionals at a conference (multiple participants mentioned the benefits of conferences), and interviewing (P12). For this type, there is no one avenue for professional learning, it is an amalgamation of practical skills with a commitment to life-long learning and curiosity.

Social media engagement is crucial for these librarians and connecting with others online is part of their hybridized, constantly evolving professional learning plan. Participants spent significant time with various social tools, including LinkedIn (P01) for PLE networking and sharing purposes, writing a blog as a “very good way to reflect on learning” (P05), “following a lot of libraries internationally on Instagram to get inspired” (P09), and using Twitter as a means for learning and current awareness (P01, P03, P05, P06, P08, P10, P12). Participant 12 articulated it this way: “I started using Twitter as part of the professional learning network movement . . . such a powerful tool. There’s just so much sharing that happens in that space. I know that there’s a lot of bad things that can happen on social media, but the goodwill of librarians who are passionate about what they do and want to share . . . we discuss the craft of being a good librarian and having that community focus.”

The Strategic Learner not only has many ideas for what they want to learn, but they can immediately articulate how it would benefit their performance in current role and also provide value for their library service or the profession. One participant took a course on event management to benefit programming at her library, while another stated that planning and organizing a small conference for other librarians in her region “was the best professional development ever” (P01)

These librarians also see the positive impact of their own PLEs upon the people they serve in the public library: “So my professional development is also a lot about knowing what’s going on in the community” (P03). For one participant an important strategy was to learn all she could about certain populations she library serves: “To engage with a particular part of the community, you gotta research them. Information is power.” In fact, this participant said understanding users is paramount. “Librarians need to do more research on who we serve, in my opinion” (P01). Another wanted a PLE on Mental Health First Aid as to “better understand what members of the community might be going through” (P03).

These librarians embrace the chance to learn from others, especially in groups. One participant was part of an international leadership program that provided PLEs via formal workshops, networking, socializing, and mentoring.

She learned to “take the bull by the horns and own my own decisions” about leadership. (P12) Another participated in a regional workshop made up of staff from all sizes of public libraries. “It was across all levels and so you learn how they do things – every library does something slightly different” (P08). “I want to learn by doing,” said on participant: “Sitting side by side with other people” (P10). Another relished any and all chances to network at events or training: “I want to pick people’s brains until there’s nothing left!” (P03).

They also pride themselves on sharing the information through PLEs with other staff and administration as a means to support learning cultures at their library. One participant praised the cyclical nature of PLEs: “And now I’m going to keep on working towards continuing that process of sharing with staff and learning and growing and not being afraid and not being too hard on yourself as well. I think that’s that’s a really important, important part of growing” (P12)

These librarians have benefitted from the encouragement of a specific supervisor (P04), the advice of a mentor (P03, P10, P11, P12), or participation in an association related to the field (P01, P05, P07, P09, P12). Some even want to pay that encouragement forward: “People have invested in me and I want to do the same” (P12).

The Strategic Learner has not only a thirst for knowledge, they also have a vision that enables them to stay motivated through all the hard work off the clock, as evidenced by the participants who stated they pursued PLEs on their “own time” often (P01, P04, P05, P06, P07, P09, P12). The pay-off is not an hourly wage for these librarians, pursuing learning is the life-blood that gives them “hope for the profession and for public libraries” (P05). The Strategic Learner believes that “engaged professionals are better at their jobs” (P01) and demonstrates that for people passionate about librarianship and learning there are no limits.

The curious Ad Hoc Learner

The **Curious Ad Hoc Learner** sees themselves as a self-directed learner with a passion for knowledge and new information, especially if it is desired and useful. One participant pursued most PLEs on her own time because of limited opportunities at her workplace but enjoyed it nonetheless. Her thoughts typify this learner: “ And I get really excited by that that learning process because it’s for me – I’m really curious person you’re learning as well so many different things that you didn’t get the opportunity to otherwise.” (P09)

The Curious Ad Hoc Learner likes to read and reflect on what they have learned: “And so to me reading works better than talking to people because when we talk to people, you’ll get, you know, their opinions as opposed to a researcher evidence based sort of idea around why that works” (P11). Another stated: “One of the ways that I like to learn is reading things. That’s

a better way for me to learn than actually going out and talking to people – everybody learns differently – that’s my preferred learning style, so I’ll read it. Research it. I’ll learn about it that way. And then, uh, you know, let it sit for a while and then put it into practice” (P06). Another stated she would rather read up on a topic alone (P02) and then discuss it with coworkers.

The Curious Ad Hoc Learner has a thirst for knowledge, and wants, as one participant describes, “to stay fresh, engaged and up to date in my field” (P04). If opportunities for training are offered at work, the Curious Ad Hoc Learner is receptive to how it could help them in their current role at the library. One participant noted “most of my learning occurs on the job as needed” (P02) and comes from asking colleagues or reading up on a particular aspect of service. These librarians look for PLEs that are presented in their preferred learning approach and are connected to their position. “I don’t want to learn about “oh shiny” – that sort of thing – but things relevant to my work. I focus on the things that I’m working on and less about just reading whatever comes my way. I don’t follow professional journals” (P06), stated one participant.

These librarians also noted they follow online mailing lists related to areas of interest as well as podcasts. The Curious Ad Hoc Learner uses social media tools for current awareness and learning: “I think things like Linked In have been really good in terms of networking and the articles that are posted even come from overseas and that kind of thing. Getting perspective on what’s happening in other countries” (P09). Conferences are of interest as well especially if they fit preferred learning style and personal preference: “I find more value in conferences that aren’t aimed at library but instead are much more multi-disciplinary, getting people from all sorts of different and often just smaller groups seminars and things like that. I find that more worthwhile” (P06).

One thing that sets the Curious Ad Hoc Learner apart from the Strategic Learner is an emphasis on PLEs as information needs appear or a new service is launched. The Strategic Learner, as noted above, does similar but also keeps an eye on what may be coming either in the field or for them personally.

The Skeptical learner

The **Skeptical Learner** has doubts about the effectiveness of PLEs, doubts concerning the usefulness of PLEs, and doubts regarding the management and administration of PLEs in their library and beyond. The Skeptical Learner is eager to learn but feels most library-provided PLEs miss the mark, or feels PLEs are unfairly managed for employees.

Believing that the only PLEs offered to them is lacks substance, these librarians are not often receptive to mandatory training and find it repetitive, “dumbed-down” (P07) and “too basic” (P04, P08). “We do have training at work. It’s pretty limited,” said one participant describing a sole emphasis on

'just in time' learning on new services or technologies. "For a particularly busy public library, the professional development opportunities that we have, in some ways, are largely limited to more of the nuts and bolts process" (P09). Another reported too much emphasis on technology: "Professional development is not on the agenda at my library, but there's lots of training for new technology" (P07). This librarian wanted a broader range of PLE topics and experiences based on interacting with others: "hearing what other people are doing" (P07). Another appreciated technology programs such as "23 Things," an open and online self-directed type of learning that included using an iPad every week to explore, but the "program was not updated" (P08).

These librarians see the potential benefits of learning for their library and library systems, but then the desire to put these ideas into practice is not always visibly possible to these librarians. Skeptical Learners cite such limitations as library governance and lack of collaborative support: "My workplace does not see professional development as a priority . . . and what they do provide is outdated and clunky. I do it by myself" (P01). Another noted: "My manager is not proactive about learning opportunities" (P07). One participant recounted a colleague's story: "She took a personal day to go to a workshop, and when her manager found out, the day off was cancelled." Another participant completed a personally invigorating learning program and reported: "So what I got out of the course is that it made me find things that explained how libraries fit in with how I view the world. But yet none of it – none of that connected to my workplace at all." (P08) The Skeptical Learner wishes their library would innovate and embrace change (P04) but cannot be the driving force (P01). Another participant attended a session on Instagram for libraries, and then discovered a roadblock: "Council doesn't allow us to have Instagram" (P08).

Skeptical Learners also question how opportunities for PLEs are administered, especially travel to conferences. "Sometimes it doesn't seem fair," said one. "Sometimes you find the same people are going to lots of things" (P09). It was unclear to this librarian how conferences were paid for, what the process was for getting to go, and how to let administration know there was interest. So a regular librarian who doesn't have a specialization within our library services, I miss out on a lot of the opportunities, unless you kind of make a song and dance over it and then it becomes like a political thing: make enough of a song and dance – she's really making a big deal out of this we probably should let her go, which I've only done on one occasion" (P09). Funding was also a concern for others (P04, P07, P10), including one participant who paid for her own learning course and never told anyone at work she did it (P07).

Discussion

Consideration of the narrative interviews and the personas has yielded these implications: understanding the learner, clear support from leadership, and encouraging a culture of learning.

Understanding the learner

For those who support the PLEs of Australian public librarians, it might be a useful exercise to reflect on the personas and how each fits into the public library setting. Understanding the learner means attention to learning styles and offering PLEs that align with the preferred ways staff learn. Training and development librarians might replicate a version of this study by asking their staff to share how they like to learn for their jobs and what topics they would most like to learn about to do their jobs well. The resulting “stories” could illuminate a path forward in offering PLEs in different formats. For example, *Strategic Learners* might feel more excited to be learning via problem solving with a group, looking at big picture issues and long range planning. The *Curious Ad Hoc Learner* might want more solo time to read about and explore topics of timely interest, such as those that come with a new service or technology implementation. The *Skeptical Learner* might appreciate learning options that are tied closely to the library’s service initiatives and strategic goals. Training librarians could offer a menu of learning options in various formats created in-house or pulled from free and paid online resources.

Clear support from leadership

A common thread that ran through many of the narrative interviews was specific mention of how learning is supported or not supported by the participants’ employers. Some felt supported and encouraged to learn by library administration. Other participants came from libraries that did not emphasize the importance of PLEs, “operating in a vacuum” as Hallam (2009, 20) stated. To others, PLEs were hard to come by because of opaque processes and one had to resort to a “song and dance” (P09) to attend a conference.

Programs for PLEs in the public library should be clearly supported, presenting a formalized process of staff learning. Offerings should also be communicated throughout the library in a transparent manner. This might include multiple channels, such as staff intranet, e-mail blasts, departmental meeting announcements, and other mechanisms for sharing.

Encouraging a culture of learning

Hallam (2009) noted that in many Australian libraries there is “keen awareness that continuing professional development has a strategic value that can underpin the success of a library . . .” (p. 20). Pathways to a positive PLE culture in the public library might include a formalized plan for PLEs, encouragement to learn in groups or solo depending on preferred style, focus on trainings and topics that evolve as library services do, the understanding that learning can happen in many ways via many channels inside and outside of the field, and an inclusive message from administration.

Participant 12 summed this idea up clearly in her interview: “Don’t underestimate the importance of leadership in public libraries. People are our most important asset and it is so important that they feel valued and safe to do their jobs and learn.” Administrators should support librarians to make sure “that they’re not afraid to try new things, that they know how to set up a project that might be innovative or make plans for creative things. So that’s all part of the learning.”

Further research

This exploratory study with 12 participants will be expanded and replicated further to understand the perceptions and preferences of public library staff for PLE offerings. An updated and revised version of the survey instrument could be shared with public libraries to jumpstart PLE initiatives and formalization. Further study on various geographic areas within Australia and globally would offer understanding of how library staff take advantage of learning opportunities. Another research option could focus on evaluating the some of the practices outlined in the discussion, including case studies of libraries that have formalized PD programs and encourage learning culture.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory study can provide public library administrators with insights regarding the learning practices of librarian staff. Administrators may be familiar with staff who are Strategic Learners or Curious Ad Hoc Learners. Perhaps the Skeptical Learner is present as well. We would encourage administrators to engage with staff to explore their own narratives of how they learn and what would best help them learn for their jobs. This would allow directors and managers to understand how best to deal with the critical insights highlighted above. Public librarians want to learn . . . and many want to do it continuously and with support from their employers. We should nurture all of our learners as best we can.

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to acknowledge the time and candor of the interview participants. Thank you!

Notes on contributors

Dr. Michael Stephens is Associate Professor in the School of Information at San Jose State University. His teaching focuses on information communities, evolving library service, and reflective practice for librarians. His research focuses on the use of emerging technologies in libraries, professional development and learning programs for librarians, and innovation in information environments.

Helen Partridge is Professor and Pro Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning at Deakin University. Her research focuses on the interplay between information, learning and technology. She investigates the ways people experience information and/or technology to learn as students, as professionals and as people in their everyday life. Professor Partridge has been a visiting research Fellow at Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, and the Berkmen Klein Centre for Internet and Society, Harvard University. She is a Fellow of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Kate Davis is an interpretivist information researcher with a strong interest in people's lived experience of learning, technology and information, and her research sits at the nexus of these interests. She is interested in how people experience information as part of their everyday lives, particularly engagement with information that is mediated by technology. Kate also has a track record as an applied researcher in information studies.

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