Online Personas: Who We Become When We Learn with Others Online

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Abstract

At the beginning of the millennium, Gladwell (2000) introduced the people who "do" the work within networks. These were dubbed connectors, mavens and salesmen. A decade on, Ochman (2013) intriguingly suggested that there were 181,000 social media gurus, ninjas, masters and mavens on Twitter. But who are these unexplained characters or personas? Have connectors, mavens and salesmen translated into contemporary social media and

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personal learning networks? This paper is therefore about the "who" rather than the "what" and "how" that are typically the focus of investigations into personal learning networks and social media interactions. This paper will contend that connectors, mavens and salesmen are still identifiable and active in network interactions, with the definition of the maven being concatenated into the role of mentor. The findings from an online survey also revealed another set of other discrete personas with characteristics created and affirmed by interactions with others. Interestingly, individuals can adopt different personas dependent on context. Thus "who" we are depends on "where" we are and "who" is with us.

The term *social media* is used to define "a variety of networked tools or technologies that emphasize the social aspects of the Internet as a channel for communication, collaboration, and creative expression" (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, p. 3). Social media, through services such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Google+ and LinkedIn (amongst others), enable us to share and access information and advice from and within a global network. Henderson (2015) explained that what these services have in common is that they "use the internet to share user-generated content … [and] allow users to create profiles and build networks or connections" (p. 116).

This paper will move beyond formally and carefully drafted profiles and look to enacted identities, that is, who we are and who we become in those of our learning networks which use social media. The research aims were built from Illich's (1971) seminal question "what kinds of

things and *people* might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (p. 78, emphases added). By this, Illich (1971) meant that information could be stored in things and in people, and that in order to learn, we need both information and critical response to its use from somebody else.

When digital technologies are added to learning, the question remains unchanged; only now it is better expressed through the theory of connectivism based on understandings that:

- Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialised nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. (Siemens, 2004, para 26)

Acknowledging the principles of connectivism, particularly the notion of a "shifting reality," this paper adopts the premise that "identity is created and recreated through experiences and is continually being reformed,

challenged, transformed or stabilised on a moment-by-moment basis. It is understood that identity is ever changing and flexible" (Johnston, 2012, p. 5) and we can adopt multiple identities (Terry & Hogg, 2012).

This paper contends that people take on multiple online identities, here called personas, depending on context. These emphasise the "social" in social media and mediate our relationship with others and how we fit within the networks we join. In this paper, identity is used as a lens for investigation (Gee, 2000; Johnston, 2012), particularly the interpretation of identity as a social construct dependent on context and reciprocal interactions with others, that is, how we respond to the "diversity of opinions" and how we nurture and maintain the "connections … needed to facilitate continual learning" (Siemens, 2004, para. 26). An alternate view is that personas are deliberately constructed to establish "satisfactory" exchanges in social life through:

> … our behavior, our clothing, our words, … to give a certain self-image, which we expect to be confirmed by others. In fact, in social interactions, individuals show a symbolic armory that allows them to play roles acceptable to others. The individual has several identities which updates within the constraints of the situation and according to his desires and interests. (Gmidene & Gharbi, 2015, para. 7)

Costa and Torres (2011) described two "macro areas" of digital identity: *presentation* and *reputation*. For them, presentation "deals with the way we showcase our practice online, how we participate and interact in shared

spaces, i.e., how we present ourselves and which 'persona' we assume as part of our presence online" (p. 49). Further to this, Costa and Torres (2011) added that reputation:

> … focuses on what others think of us. … Our reputation, independently of having an online presence, is socially bound. Our behaviour is socially and culturally modelled, and socially and culturally judged. Other people's judgements of our conduct and performance determine the way people consider us. (p. 49)

This paper has adopted the term 'persona' (after Costa and Torres, 2011) although the terms 'identity' and 'role' are also used in the literature to describe the same phenomena. The study described in this paper began with Gladwell's (2000) classic examination of social connectedness which introduced the roles of "connector," "maven" and "salesman." These roles were critical to the dissemination of information referred to as "social epidemics." They were not exclusively digital roles, they were, rather, the characters we would encounter in any network. These three roles were the active "20% who do 80% of the work" (Gladwell, 2000). This study aimed to identify if/how these roles have translated to social media as it is used in personal learning networks.

This study also looked to see what other personas might have emerged in learning networks that are unique to, and enabled through, the social media platform supporting the network. Apart from systematic investigations of lurking (see Edelmann, 2013), much of the current commentary on online personas is populist and anecdotal. For example, Ochman (2013) reported that Twitter users accord themselves roles taking "the title[s] with tongue firm-

ly planted in cheek" (para. 5). These, typically predicated with the term "social media," included: authority, evangelist, expert, guru, ninja, maven, and warrior. Other listings of online personas are based on personal observation and experience. For example, White (2001) compiled a list of "community member roles and types" that she encountered: core participants; readers/lurkers; dominators; linkers, weavers and pollinators; flamers; actors and characters; energy creatures; defenders; needlers; newbies or New Bees; Pollyannas, spammers; "black and white" folks; "shades of grey" folks; and untouchable elders. A salient difference here is that Ochman (2013) lists how people described themselves while White's (2001) list uses categories applied from an objective distance.

Despite the hype, it has been shown that, in all communities and networks reliant on interaction, individuals adopt differing roles. Cover (2012) explained that "through friendship and relationality, identifications [identities] are stabilised through commentary, updates, discussions communication and interactivity" (p. 185). Thus, this study poses the following questions:

> **RQ1:** If/how have connectors, mavens and salesmen (Gladwell, 2000) translated as personas in online personal networks?
>
> **RQ2:** What personas have emerged shaped by affordances of social media and interactions with others?

A further motivation for the study was to respond to Welser, Gleave, Fisher and Smith's (2007) call, albeit in terms of formal social networking methodologies:

> … for finding roles in online data [that] will be

> helpful for users and organizers of online forums who may be able to use these techniques to build reputation systems which identify helpful or deleterious users. … [and to] contribute to our ability to identify social roles and thus provide a foundational step towards the development of a taxonomy of contributors to online discussion spaces. (p. 3)

It is hoped that this study will contribute to a taxonomy of contributors to personal learning networks. It is further hoped that it will add some rigour to the populist commentary and anecdotal reporting currently available and open opportunities for further research.

The Study

Conducted in 2016, this study aimed to develop a greater understanding of the personas adopted by those who use social media to further their own personal learning and to investigate the presence and current nature of the identified roles of "connectors," "mavens" and "salesmen" (Gladwell, 2000). This, the authors hasten to add, was not about deception or investigating instances where people purport to be someone else as part of inappropriate or criminal activities. It is rather about how we present ourselves in often unknown company. This ranges from silent observation, akin to lurking online, to being the life of the party, akin to those who vigorously promote themselves online as gurus or ninjas, often without the evidence to warrant this descriptor.

Methodology

Qualitative data was gathered through a voluntary,

anonymous online survey (Dillman, 2007) that asked participants to comment upon their interactions with members of their personal learning network(s) and the perceived importance of the personas they identified.

The study opted to define personas through their actions and to ask survey respondents to provide examples of those they identified. This followed Cover's (2012) suggestion that:

> … an alternative approach to understanding social networking and identity is to take into account some of the ways in which social networking activities are *performative acts of identity which constitute the user*. That is, non-conscious, non-voluntarist uses of online social networking that retroactively produce the user with a particular selfhood, demographic of user, connections and identifications. (p. 178, emphasis added)

The research participants were educators (n=59) who regularly engage in social networking and who contribute resources and ideas to their peers. A general call, through the authors' own networks, was made to ask those who met the criteria to complete an online survey. The findings of the study were, therefore, drawn from a purposive sample of educators whose responses would be based on their first-hand experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

An online survey is, by default, aligned to the social media it seeks to investigate, that is, "conducting a survey is, at its core, a social interaction between a researcher and a (potential) respondent - a 'conversation with a pur-

pose'" (Murphy, Hill, & Dean, 2014, p. 1). The survey consisted of 10 items, investigating five topics: (a) Background/social media use (Q.1-2); (b) Reciprocity and application of learning to practice (Q.3-4); (c) Connectors, mavens and salesman (Gladwell, 2000) (Q.5-8); (d) Multiplicity of roles (Q.9); and (e) Identifying other roles (Q.10). The responses to Questions 5-10, that is, concerning roles observed in PLNs, provided the data for this paper. The findings from other topics are reported elsewhere. No question in the survey was set as mandatory allowing respondents to leave any question blank. Despite this, all participants (*n=59*) in the online survey responded to the majority of items.

Questions 5-7 asked, in turn, about the roles identified by Gladwell (2000). The same format for each role was used; a definition was offered followed by the simple Yes/No question which asked "Is there anyone in your PLN who could be described as a connector (or maven, or salesman)." If "Yes" was selected, survey respondents were then asked to add further detail or an example of characteristic behaviours. The request for additional explanation was, for example: *Please share some examples of their connecting. What have they done which marks them as connectors?* (Q.5).

Question 8 asked survey respondents to rate the importance of connectors, mavens and salesmen in a personal learning network; while Question 9 asked if respondents believed that people assume more than one role. Question 10 asked if there were roles other than connectors, mavens and salesmen in a personal learning network. This was an open response item which asked survey respondents to describe these roles and to explain how im-

portant they are and how they might affect others' learning.

The majority of survey questions (Q.5, 6, 7, 9, 10) began with a request to provide a simple Yes/No response. Tallies were made to indicate general trends and perceptions. Following this simple binary, a request was made for an extended text response and a de-identified example. These were later subjected to independent thematic coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to assure validity of the findings. Overall, an open approach was taken to the data and survey responses were used to guide analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented and discussed in two sections: Revisiting connectors, mavens and salesmen; and, Identifying additional personas.

Revisiting Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen

Gladwell's (2000) roles can be comparatively described as: "*Mavens* are data banks. They provide the message. *Connectors* are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people – *salesmen* – with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing" (p. 70, emphases added). Each role was identified by the majority of survey respondents as being present, that is, persisting into social media and personal learning networks, albeit exhibiting and enacting behaviours unique to social media.

Connector

A *connector* is someone who knows people in a

range of positions and with differing expertise. They link their networks of people to each other. Connectors are essentially masters of the "weak social tie" (Giraldi, 2016), being able to network with people of different backgrounds despite not interacting with them regularly. Gladwell (2000) explained that connectors are "people with a special gift for bringing the world together" (p. 38).

In social media, a connector is someone who connects you with other people to expand your PLN. This may happen as a consequence of the connector being asked by other members of the PLN or where the connector spontaneously offers connections believed to benefit others. The survey asked if someone in the respondent's PLN could be described as a "connector," someone who links people by having a large network of contacts that they refer to others to assist them with their problems or needs. Almost all, (n=55, 93.22%) replied in the affirmative with just under half of this subset (n=27, 49.09%) providing a credible example. Some examples are:

- *Responding to a question with a reply & also #tags for the topic, contact info for others …, creating "TwitterLists," FB Groups, based around particular topics to allow people to connect through interests.*
- *Referring/tagging people in posts/messages and introducing them to each other; referring others onto their work; making suggestions for PD; introducing people to each other at F2F conferences; seeing/hearing something and passing it on with a "saw this and thought of you" message.*
- *They reply to a Facebook comment saying they don't know but that X or Y might be able to help (tagging them), which usually leads to a decent answer to the*

original question.

- *They introduce people via a contextual tweet, e.g. "Hey @X you may be interested in what @Y is working on [link]"*

The form of the connections described were digital, namely, hashtags, Twitter handles, website addresses. This is a different to the connectors that Gladwell (2000) had described. These connectors had moved into online spaces and used online tools and associated conventions to consolidate and share their connections.

Maven

Mavens are "information brokers, sharing and trading what they know" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 69). In social media, mavens are regularly consulted within their PLN. They post regularly about a myriad of topics and frequently engage in discussions within their PLN. Gladwell (2000) explained that "to be a maven is to be a teacher. But it is also, even more emphatically, to be a student" (p. 69). The survey respondents were asked if anyone in their PLN could be described as a "maven," an expert in a particular field or is knowledgeable in a range of topics and who gathers and shares information they believe is useful to know. As with the response regarding "connectors," almost all (n=54, 91.53%) replied in the affirmative with two thirds of this subset (n=34, 62.96%) providing credible examples of "maven" behaviour, including:

- *Writing regularly controversial posts to spark debate and share knowledge.*
- *Constantly providing URLs to answer questions or advising on places to source answers to queries.*

- *Collating resources in one central area and sharing the site with thousands of educators. Providing links to research during heated discussions on Yammer.*
- *Share information across (within & across communities), search for answers to questions, collate information and share.*

Interestingly, some respondents offered example behaviours, which, outside of a digital space, would better fit the definition of a "connector." This shows that there is parity between static information and the information that people hold, something unique to learning networks.

- *Always respond to queries with personal knowledge, or links to information or other people.*
- *When someone asks a question, they tag an expert so they can provide assistance.*

The survey respondents identified a maven-like identity: the mentor. This "wise elder" role was noted as being important in PLNs and various synonymous terms were used, for example, mentor, coach, and expert. These were noted as people who:

- *immediately jump in to assist someone who is applying for a job and needs help preparing … and all the other times a teacher needs a coach;*
- *you can ask for feedback and discuss any issues with discretion and support;*
- *are willing to openly share their personal experiences to guide others, thus encouraging everyone to reflect on their professional practice and how it can be and,*
- *whose length and depth of service places them as provider of wisdom and encouragement.*

Further, in a response to Q.10 asking about online personas, one participant described a "translator" with the explanation that: *Translators pass ideas on from one PLN to another*. The passing of ideas between networks is a uniquely digital action. The respondents were speaking of someone who is not a passive collector of information, but more importantly, is someone who actively shares their knowledge to inform and encourage others. Mentors and translators are thus clearly related to mavens.

Salesman

A salesman is someone who has the ability to persuade others, when they are unconvinced, to participate in an idea or movement. Salesmen are charismatic and able to present information, coupled with body language and tone of voice, in a way that seems enticing and to your benefit (Gladwell, 2000). Online, salesmen replace voice, facial expressions and body language with emojis, exclamation marks and images (Skyring, 2014).

Survey respondents were asked if anyone in their PLN could be described as a "salesman," someone who has the ability to persuade others to participate in an idea or movement and able to present information in a way that seems enticing to our benefit. There was mixed response, in contrast to the confidence of previous responses. In this instance, there were 57 responses (n=59, 96.61%). Roughly two thirds (n=36, 63.16%) said "Yes" with the remainder saying "No" (n=21, 36.84%). This lack of confidence (cf. >90% affirmative responses in previous items) is further evident in the fewer number of credible examples provided (n=20, 55.56%). The examples of "salesman" behaviour included:

- *Enthusiastic representation of teaching strategies that are new to me [and] encourage me to expand upon my own teaching practice.*
- *Write often and lots. High list presence, frequently point out applications of a technology.*
- *Encourages others to attend professional learning opportunities.*
- *Encouraging/facilitating participation in groups, #tag discussions and similar.*

A number of comments (*n*=16, 16.67%) indicated that salesmen were regarded in a negative light. For example:

- *Trying to get me involved because I am me, not because it may actually suit me.*
- *X posts long rants on a small number of topics, and usually has a resource they have written on this topic to direct people to.*
- *… any form of sales or self-promotion or pushing of ideas is likely to turn me off and I might drop them from my PLN (i.e. stop following them).*
- *Actively spruiking concepts (rather than presenting these ideas with a reflective or critical wrapper)*
- *A few in my PLN could be considered salesman, but I am a reluctant purchaser!*
- *… People who actually sell stuff I avoid in my PLN.*

A response to Q.10 concerning the possibility of people assuming multiple roles offered that "*'salesmen' are more credible if they are also Connectors and Mavens*." Enthusiasm and uncritical comments can be excused/ tolerated if tempered by the positive contributions evident

in other interactions with the community/network.

Assuming Multiple Roles

Following the previously-cited understanding that identities are not fixed and that we can adopt multiple identities (Johnston, 2012; Terry & Hogg. 2012), survey respondents were asked if they believed that people assume more than one of the three roles (connector, maven, salesman) within their PLN. Of those who responded to this question (n=55, 93.22%), the majority (n= 52, 94.55%) believed this to be the case, with only three responding in the negative including one who offered "probably not." Comments and explanations included:

- *Particularly maven/salesman - mavens can often be quite evangelical about their knowledge and seek to convince others of the cause.*
- *Definitely. Information and connections are shared on a reciprocal basis so people swap between roles. My PLN doesn't really have a salesman but has such strong faith in the expertise of other members that a recommendation from them doesn't need much of a sell.*
- *Yes, in fact it is hard to separate out the functions. Often experts connect with other experts and share those connections with the PLN making them both Maven and Connectors. And their success in their field of expertise gives them elevated influence making them both Maven and Salespeople.*

One respondent succinctly offered "Yes. Me. All" while another provided evidence of their response by saying that:

> *Yes - the three examples …[I offered] were all chosen from the same person and there are a number of these in my PLN. I believe that the roles often overlap and that some "behaviours" fall into more than one role. I try myself to take all of those roles but know I am not good at [being a]… a "salesman."*

This indicated to us that, while remaining distinct, the differences between these roles were reducing. In particular, the distance between connector and mavens was reducing because of the curious affordance of social media to enact Illich's (1971) contention that information can be stored in "things and people." A connector shares people, while a maven shares things.

Finally, assuming more than one of the three roles (connector, maven, salesman) was seen as acceptable and even valuable. The following responses encapsulate this sense of value:

- *Yes - the most valuable members are those that slip into different roles depending on the context. … Connected educators are able to switch hats often.*
- *Balance between roles can make members of the PLN engage more deeply and critically.*
- *Yes, it's a fact, I do it! I can see how some people may prefer to take on only a maven role, say - but it seems natural, if the circumstances are right, to be both a maven and a connector - you are sharing your knowledge on where to find information in both cases. Not everyone can be salesmen though, as - if they belong to a community - it requires some (usually self-initiated) involvement in behind-the-scenes planning of the "what" and "how" of that community's events.*

Table 1

Importance of Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen in a PLN (n=44)

	Connectors		Mavens		Salesmen	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Unimportant (1)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	1	(2.27%)
2	0	(0%)	1	(2.27%)	1	(2.27%)
3	1	(2.27%)	1	(2.27%)	4	(9.09%)
Neutral (4)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	15	(34.09%)
5	6	(13.64%)	6	(13.64%)	11	(25%)
6	7	(15.91%)	10	(22.73%)	3	(6.82%)
Important (7)	30	(68.18%)	26	(59.09%)	9	(20.46%)

Relative Importance of Roles

Respondents (*n*=44) were asked to rank the relative importance of connectors, mavens and salesmen to a PLN on a 7-point scale (with "7" being the highest and "1" being the lowest) (see Table 1).

The most important roles, indicated by a rating of "7," were connectors (*n*=30, 68.18%) and mavens (*n*=26, 59.09%). When the ratings for "6" and "7" were added together, the results remained the same for connectors (*n*=37, 84.09%) and mavens (*n*=36, 81.82%). The affordances of social media are attuned to the connector and maven role, namely, the capacity to communicate on a 1:many platform and to collate and curate information. Further, a response to Q.9 concerning the possibility of people assuming multiple roles offered that:

> *I think people can switch roles depending on how passionate they are about certain things they want*

> *to share. … the connector role comes with a lot of trust and many, many, posts so the network trusts their input because they see their name around all the time. Mavens are helpful for clarity … necessary to stop people guessing*.

This response provides an explanation as to why collectors and mavens are so valued and yet how they retain distinct identities in terms of both presentation and reputation (see Costa & Torres, 2011).

The response to the importance of salesmen was intriguing with a third (n=15, 34.09%) opting to choose "neutral." There was no parallel indecision for connectors or mavens, that is, no respondent chose "neutral." Further, only one fifth (n=9, 20.46%) believed that the role of salesman was "7" rising to over one quarter (n=12, 27.27%) when the ratings for "6" and "7" are combined. This result, combined with the previously cited descriptions of salesmen indicates an underlying mistrust or dislike of their behaviour in learning networks. By comparison, as noted, it would seem that the respondents in this survey clearly valued and trusted the contributions of connectors and mavens to their personal learning networks.

Identifying Additional Personas

Respondents were asked if they could identify personas other than connectors, mavens, and salesmen in their PLN(s). Fifty-five (93.22%) responded and in most cases provided multiple options. For example, in a single comment, one respondent described five explicit roles:

> *Coach - people who immediately jump in to assist someone who is applying for a job and needs help preparing...and all the other times a teacher needs*

> *a coach. Mentor - someone whose length and depth of service places them as provider of wisdom and encouragement. Creative - someone who has a flair for design and is consulted when pizzazz or panache is needed. Tech early adopter - the PLN member who buys every edutech toy and gadget and tests them and provides reviews. Tech nerd - the one to go to when the hard drive fails. (emphases added)*

Others offered depth in their response and a synthesis of their observations with the roles considered in the survey, namely connectors, mavens and salesmen. One offered that:

- *Followers are sometimes important if they occasionally comment on how the ideas of the mavens and connectors have actually helped them in pointing them towards people or ideas that they have found useful. Otherwise - the motivation behind being a maven or connector might be lacking! … Mavens and connectors see this as a higher calling and get the reciprocal benefit of being considered positive social capital!*
- *… I also think there is another critical role which could be called "seeker." Many of us turn to our PLN when are grappling with a new idea, facing a technical challenge. We seek the wisdom of the community. I'm also wondering about the "lurker" role. In some communities I may not contribute much, or even agree with the contributors' perspectives, but want to "keep my finger on the pulse." The other role, which I hesitate to include in Salesman is one of Thought Leader. Sometimes PLNs are good to stir discussion without per-*

suading towards one's own viewpoint. Which can be healthier than the debates created by salesman.

Others positioned roles in relationship to connectors, mavens and salesmen. For example:

- *Supporters- may not contribute directly but their liking & sharing affirms what the mavens, connectors, and salespeople are doing*
- *Yes, diplomats. These moderate the tensions that arise, particularly between Mavens and Salesmen.*
- *I think there is a role of happy participant. Someone who is keen to follow the people who are connectors, mavens and salesmen.*

From this rich description, a number of personas, were identified including the previously cited "mentor" and "translator" which have been reported with the description of mavens. A number of roles were identified that could be characterised as White's (2001) "core participants" which she described as:

> … a small group of people who quickly adapt to online interaction and provide a large proportion of an online group's activity. Some speculate that 10% of the membership make up 90% of the community activity. These individuals visit frequently and post often. They are important members. (para. 2)

Core participants, a persona which encompasses connectors, mavens and salesmen, were seen as "sharers" or people who have "*learned the ropes of the PLN over time, are confident to speak up and share, and do share useful and appropriate information*." Multiple terms were

used, such as: supporters (who give positive feedback); conscientious objectors; criticisers; cheerleaders; and "the choir." Further, core participants were also categorised by expertise. One was "technical" who provided responses to request for help on IT problems, while another, as previously noted, was "creative" described as "someone who has a flair for design and is consulted when pizzazz or panache is needed." Anyone active or who contributes in online spaces could be deemed to be a "core participant." This role was seen as "vital" in a PLN and was evidenced in the sharing of knowledge, ideas, strategies and lessons. One survey respondent spoke of contributors as being "*the human face of the PLN. They show it belongs to everyone, not just a handful. They contribute helpful learning points, and comments, that are often a different perspective than frequent contributors may have grown used to*."

Another survey respondent identified the role of "occasional" contributor as someone who "*is learning how to use and interact in a PLN.*" Where contributions were limited, the persona of the "responder" was suggested. This described someone who only replies to people, comments or information but does not initiate discussion or pose questions. The remaining roles (presented in no particular order) are: lurkers, challengers, facilitators, irritants, and leeches. They are distinctly different from Gladwell's (2000) connectors, mavens and salesmen.

Lurkers

Edelmann (2013) posited an argument for lurkers as valuable participants in communities. The majority of respondents to this research likewise took a positive view of lurking with statements such as:

- *I think lurker is a valid role. I lurk often, more in some networks than others. I learn a great deal and only contribute when it seems like I have something to offer.*
- *Those who belong but do not contribute for whatever reason. Even if something is shared without a prior query, there is the likelihood that it will enable the learning of someone who is otherwise "invisible."*
- *They watch and observe but don't interact. They do absorb and refer where required.*
- *… learners or passive recipients. These are important as people like to have an audience.*

Interestingly, there were other personas suggested who could be classified as lurkers. For example, newbies might also lurk "before they feel they are worthy to contribute." One respondent suggested the persona of "reader" explained as:

> *… this person is getting benefit from the PLN and values it, but does not contribute. They are important in the PLN as they may be spreading the word in other face-to-face ways and may crop up to help in unexpected places when called upon in a more direct way.*

Further, there was a subset of lurkers referred to as "'The Lost' who were active once upon a time but seem to have disappeared... without deleting their profiles/ logins/identities." These simply appear to lurk but are genuinely absent.

What was surprising was the genuinely positive attitude to lurking with one response ending with the caveat, "that's okay, they're learning." The general consensus was that lurking was akin to legitimate peripheral

participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There was an unexpected breadth and nuance in how the respondents to the survey described lurking. It could be contended that lurking was a persona (and behaviour) that all had adopted at different times and therefore there was empathy toward it. The negative end of the continuum from the lurker was the "leech" (described later in this section).

Challengers

These were variously described as: people who challenge your thinking by responding in different ways or helping to deepen your thinking; "stirrers" who take a controversial position to create reaction (who are also categorised as 'irritants'); and "thought leaders" (also categorised as 'salesmen') who initiate debates. Challengers may add their own experience or question certain suggestions and/or resources, or play the role of asking questions that others won't ask because they are not sure whether the questions are silly or make sense. Irrespective of how they perceive themselves, challengers appear across categories and are perceived in distinctly different ways.

Facilitators

This persona was identified as important but was not discrete; it overlapped with other roles. It was noted that, in any learning situation, effective facilitation has a highly positive impact on learning. A facilitator is someone who keeps the conversation going, maintains cohesion and ensures that others are heard. It was noted that facilitators "*keep the peace if necessary and provide the social oil for the wheels of the professional relationship*" and were, poetically, described as "attentive gardeners." Facilitators

were seen as people who are often, but not always, a group administrator or a discussion moderator. They were variously described as: diplomat, negotiator, peacemaker, supporter, custodian, carer or nurturer. The importance of facilitation was evident in comments such as:

- *Without these attentive gardeners, the PLN will gradually decay in quality over time and be nothing but cat memes, Buzzfeed grammar quizzes, pointless questions and trolling responses before you know it.*
- *These people play an important "lubrication" role enabling discussion to flow productively but with mutual respect.*
- *These people often help others find common ground or refocus on topics rather than personalities or politics.*
- *These people give the heart to PLNs by looking out for the wellbeing of individuals and groups, offering support at times of need and by their behaviour reminding everyone in the PLN that the network is primarily a people space.*
- *These people take a long term role in maintaining the "memory" of the network, especially its shared values and culture as well as its more mundane operational side.*

Interestingly, one respondent added facilitation to the role of connector (in response to Q.5) by offering that: *[they] help moderate a group or community, gather people around them, encourage people to connect, put people in touch with others who can help.*

Irritants

Not all personas were viewed as being positive.

Some were noted as being annoying and/or disruptive. These personas have, for the purpose of this paper, been labelled as "irritants" in that they make others in the network feel angry or annoyed or discourage participation. Various forms of behaviour were described as falling into this category:

- *knockers (people who automatically trash an idea);*
- *negative mavens (people who seem to go out of their way to have an opinion different to yours but not in a constructive way).*
- *stirrers (people who take a controversial position just to create reaction);*
- *sycophants (people who automatically gush praise even if the idea is not praiseworthy);*
- *'groupies' - they jump on the bandwagon of what the 'salesman' has to offer to give the message critical mass.*
- *self promoters (people whose only posts are to promote their company or products);*
- *preachers (people who preach the same thing over and over again);*
- *"icky" motivators (people who "post icky motivational empowering messages that they have cut and pasted from Hallmark cards");*
- *takers (people who you never or rarely see or hear, except as a name on a list of 'members' in a group, except very occasionally when they ask a question).*
- *The Kardashians* (in reference to an article describing teachers on social media who want you to know what an amazing teacher they are and frequently post about what a difference they are making. ("Secret teacher," 2016).

One reason why irritants arouse annoyance is encapsulated in the following response. The "user" persona is used here in a pejorative sense.

- *User - this person will ask questions - often to do with their university assignment, for instance - but makes no other contributions to help others, and frequently does not even say thank you for responses made. They are not helpful group members and do not affect learning - in fact they may have a detrimental effect if not diluted by more useful discussion.*

The nub of the irritation here is the lack of reciprocity (see McCabe, 2003; Pelaprat & Brown, 2012) that is the hallmark of the behaviours of connectors and mavens, which are so evidently valued in a personal learning network (see Table 1). This response goes on to articulate the "detrimental effect" that this kind of behaviour (similar to the "takers" and "responders") can have on a network.

Leeches

The final persona in this list, viewed the most negatively of all, was given the label "leech" by respondents to the survey. A leech was variously described as someone who: takes without contributing; "just leeches" information/resources; views and uses the information but never shares; watches and takes and contributes nothing but actively uses information from the site with or without citing the source; and who "sucks the goodness out of everything, uses it for their own good, and doesn't acknowledge where they got it from." Leeches were described with emotive language. In this, they were distanced from the descriptors of lurkers whose inactivity was likened, quite

empathetically, to orientation and learning. They were also distanced from "users" who, while broadly fitting in this category, were spared the vitriol reserved for leeches.

In sum, there was an extraordinary range of personas described in vivid language. While these were discrete, there are instances of overlaps with Gladwell's (2000) list of connectors, mavens and salesmen. The descriptions offered by the survey respondents were personal and tended to describe nuanced personalities and intentions rather than generic behaviours.

Conclusion

The first research question of this study was to explore the roles of "connectors," "mavens" and "salesmen" (Gladwell, 2000) in the personal learning networks of educators. From a purposive sample of educators (n=59), the study concludes that these three roles remain current but have taken on uniquely digital characteristics. While there was some suspicion of salesmen, the roles of connectors and mavens were valued within personal learning networks. The distinction between the roles was clearly articulated although the distance between maven and connector was reducing in discernible ways and it appeared that these two roles were often combined. Interestingly, the participants in this study noted that individuals could assume multiple personas (Terry & Hogg, 2012) with one respondent admitting to selecting examples of connector, maven and salesman behaviour from one individual's posts. This finding sits well with identity theory (Cover, 2012; Gmidene & Gharbi, 2015). In the instance of personal learning networks, this multiplicity was valued. A number of participants identified themselves as adopting mul-

tiple roles depending on circumstance and context epitomised in the cited response, "Yes. Me. All."

The second research question sought to identify any additional roles observed or encountered in online spaces. The intention was to generate a list based on reported personal experience. The identified personas added to our understanding of connectors, mavens and salesman. Those outside of these roles were categorised as: lurkers, core participants, challengers, facilitators, irritants and leeches. The descriptions provided were often self-explanatory and provided a rich array of who we might become when we learn online with others. Of particular interest were the subsets of personas which indicated a genuine idiosyncracy in how people represent themselves and they are, in turn, viewed by others.

Finally, this study brought home how personally engaged participants in personal learning networks are. They were as concerned with their fellow participants as they were with the topics under discussion. It also gave us cause to see contemporary social media platforms as being transparent – personas can be discerned behind the words, or, perhaps, are embodied in the words. People online are as varied and reactive as they are in the real world. The study has shown some significant additions to who does the work in an online network (after Gladwell, 2000) and how rich are the roles that they adopt.

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