Building Your Personal Learning Environment

Using tools such as Twitter, Feedly, Google Drive, Delicious, and Blogger.

Edge Hill University

Learning Services • Learning Technology Development
Introduction

In this session we looked at how we can develop what sometimes gets called a Personal Learning Environment (PLE).

PLE is a term that means different things to different people. For the purposes of this session, I’m defining a PLE as an informal learning environment that a learner puts together themselves, from online services and pieces of software. This environment would be used by the learner to discover and manage resources, manage their learning, and communicate with other learners.

You can also think about a PLE in relation to a VLE. So where a VLE is managed by the institution, a PLE is more managed by a learner. While the VLE is used during a formal course, a PLE is used for whatever timescale the learner wants to learn about one or more topics.
What might there be in a PLE?

There are different ways to think about what you might use as part of your PLE.

One perspective might be to think in terms of tools for:

- Discovering people and resources
  - Social Networking Sites (e.g. Twitter)
  - Feed Readers (e.g. Feedly)
- Sharing Resources
  - Social Networking Sites (e.g. Twitter)
  - Creating Resources (e.g. Blogger)
- Storage
  - Bookmarks

Another perspective might be to look at the tools you are using in terms of Blooms Revised Taxonomy, and think about what tools you might use for creating, evaluating, analysing, applying, understanding and remembering. Blogging tools like Blogger might be suitable for many learning activities, while flashcard tools like Memrise, and bookmarking tools like Delicious might be suitable tools for learning activities related to remembering.

But that is going in to more detail than this session is really designed for. What we’re going to do is to look at some individual tools that could support your own informal learning, and by the end of the session you’ll have got started with them, had a go, and be in a better position to decide how relevant they are to you.
**Twitter: Getting Started**

People use Twitter for many different reasons, but there will probably be people who are interested in the area that you are, and who will share and briefly comment on resources and articles. This means it is a useful tool for connecting with other learners in an area.

You can get started with Twitter by visiting [twitter.com](http://twitter.com) and creating an account. Currently you’ll need to use the ‘New to Twitter?’ section.

![New to Twitter? Sign up](image)

Twitter will take you through an introduction to what Tweets are, how to follow other users, and will encourage you to upload a photo of yourself. By the end of this process you will probably be following a few brands and celebrities. Now your challenge is to find people to follow who are more relevant to you and your areas of interest.

**Twitter: Finding People to Follow**

One way to do this is to look for the twitter hashtag for events that you attend. For example this year’s SOLSTICE Conference has the tag #SOLSTICE2014. If you search for this in Twitter’s search box (see below) you’ll see the most recent Tweets that mention this topic.

![Search for #SOLSTICE2014](image)

Today the search for #SOLSTICE2014 looked like this.
If you search for this just before the conference, during it, or just after, you’ll see who is talking about the conference, and you’ll be able to click on their name (in the example above the user is called ‘SolsticeCETL’) and click on the ‘Follow’ button to follow them.

When you ‘follow’ a user it means that their tweets appear on your Home page. Other activity such as their ‘retweets’ appear too. Retweets are sent when a user clicks the ‘Retweet’ button on someone else’s tweet, so that those the user followers will see it as well. You might find interesting people to follow because their messages have been retweeted by people that you follow.

**Twitter: Using Lists to Manage Your Use**

If you end up using Twitter heavily, having lots of conversations and following hundreds of people, you might need to use tools to help you. Lists is one that is built into the Twitter.com web site. Lists mean that if you just wanted to focus on tweets from a certain group, e.g. work related ones, you can.

If you click on someone’s name to go to their profile page, you should see a cog icon which opens a drop down menu. One of the options that appears is ‘Add remove from lists…’.
A page appears where you can create new lists and add the user in question to a list.

If you go to your own Twitter profile page, you will see that there is a link on the left hand side named ‘Lists’. Use this link to manage you lists.

**Twitter: Other Tools for Managing Your Use**

TweetDeck enables you to more easily track certain things on Twitter. It allows you set up a series of columns, with different purposes.

For example:

- The Home column shows the most recent Tweets
- Notifications shows things like people who have followed you, or retweeted your Tweets.
- Messages shows the direct messages that have been sent to you.
- You can search for a topic and add that as a column.
Feeds and Feed Readers

There are a wide range of online sources that you might want to keep track of that are related to areas that you want to learn about. For example there is news related to your profession, the HE sector as a whole, and your academic discipline. You might read personal blogs by people in your profession to hear their opinions and experiences. You might also read a range of academic journals, and want to know when new issues are released.

As you discover more and more web sites, personal blogs, and journals, it takes more and more time to keep visiting them. Some will offer email updates, but you can end up with too many emails to deal with.

One solution to this is to subscribe to the web feeds that many sites make available.

A web feed is like a table of contents for a web site, or blog. As new articles and posts are added to a site or blog, the web feed is updated.

When you’ve been using the web you’ll probably seen an orange symbol like the one below, or a variation on it.

![RSS Symbol](image)

This symbol is used to indicate that the web site has a feed that you can subscribe to. You might also see icons like the one below, or mentions of RSS and Atom.

![RSS and Atom Icons](image)

RSS feeds and Atom feeds are types of web feed, and if you see these terms you know you that you are dealing with web feeds.
Web feeds can be subscribed to using what is commonly called feed reader, or feed aggregator software. Examples are Feedly, Netvibes and Flipboard.

**Feedly: Introduction**

We’ll use Feedly as an example to show how feed readers work. If you want to set up your own account on Feedly go to [Feedly.com](http://Feedly.com). It currently uses one of your Google, Facebook, Windows, etc. accounts to authenticate you, so you’ll need one of these.

If you would like to use Feedly on your phone, there are currently mobile apps available for Android and iOS devices. The mobile app is great for reading, but it is easier to manage your subscriptions on a desktop computer or laptop.

**Feedly: Subscribing**

Once you have logged in you can choose which web sites to follow, from the topic areas that Feedly displays to you. These are usually the major sites that you would go to to read about topics, and some of them may be useful to you. However one of the benefits of using a feed reader is that you can subscribe to sites that are interesting only a small number of people. These might be sites that you already enjoy, or you might need to search for them.

You could search for them using the search box (below) that you see when you click on ‘Add Content’.

![Search for a website or a topic you love to read](image)

Click on a result that is relevant.
This will show you a page of articles on this feed. Click on the ‘Subscribe’ button at the top of the page.

Options will then appear on the left of the screen. You can use this to organise your feeds into ‘Collections’, which is useful if you have a lot. Finally click on the ‘Add’ button at the bottom of the page to add the feed to your collection.

If the feed that you want does not appear in the search, you could also find the URL/web address of a feed on its own site. You can often get this by clicking on the feed symbol on the site, copying the URL for the page or file that appears, and pasting that URL into the Feedly search box. Click the Subscribe and Add buttons as mentioned above to add the feed to your collection.
**Feedly: Reading**

Once you have subscribed to feeds, you will want to read them. If you click on the ‘All’ link or a collection name on the left hand side of the screen, the latest messages from the feeds will appear in the middle of the screen.

The feeds here are shown in ‘Title Only’ view. Click on the cog button near the top right of the screen to find the view which suits you best.

On the screen shown above you can see that the Learning Technology collection is shown in bold text with a number next to it. This means that there is a new ‘unread’ item in that collection. This item in question is shown in bold text in the centre of the screen.

To set an item as unread, you can read it. To set all items in the list as unread click on the tick button near the top right of the screen.

To save an item to read later click on the bookmark symbol that is shown to the right of every item in the list view, and at the bottom of an article that you are reading in other views. It will turn green.
**Feedly: Unsubscribing**

Over time you will find which feeds bring you useful content, and which bring you noise. If you would like to remove one, choose the title from the list on the left hand side.

Then click on the ‘Remove’ button that appears at the top of the screen.

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**Feed Readers: On Mobile**

At the time of writing Feedly is available on iOS and Android phones. Other alternatives are listed on the [Feedly Apps page](#), including alternative apps for Windows phone.
Other Tools

We’ve gone into detail on using Twitter and Feedly. Below are some quick introductions to other tools, and types of tool that you might find interesting or useful.

Google Drive

This is an example of an online service that enables you to share documents, co-create documents at the same time. Depending on your needs other similar tools might offer different options e.g. Dropbox.

To access Google Drive, log into you Google Account, open the drop down menu and choose Drive.

Google Drive gives you options for creating, uploading, managing and sharing documents.
Delicious

Delicious is an example of a Social Bookmarking tool. You might use a tool like this so that your bookmarks are available anywhere, or to use tags to share collections of web pages and sites that you think are important. It also allows you to see what other people have bookmarked, and to follow people with similar interests.

Below you can see that bookmarks can be given tags and comments. You can make some private if you don’t want to share them all.

To make it easier to bookmark sites drag the ‘Add to Delicious’ link to your bookmarks toolbar in your web browser.
Blogging Tools

Blogging is a way not only to demonstrate your expertise in an area, but to develop your understanding and ideas. It’s a worthwhile learning activity even if hardly anyone else is reading it.

An example of a free tool that hosts your blog is Google’s Blogger.

Blogger allows you to set up a number of blogs, and gives you the tools to create posts and manage the blogs.
**Podcasts**

Podcasts are a series of audio or video files, which have a feed that can be subscribed to.

You could subscribe to podcasts using feed readers, but there are pieces of software designed for dealing specifically with podcasts. They are sometimes called Podcast Aggregators and examples would be [iTunes](https://www.itunes.com), [Juice](http://www.juiceapp.com) and [DoggCatcher](http://www.doggcatcher.com), although there are many more.

When you’ve subscribed to podcasts in a podcast aggregator, the software can be set to check the podcasts’ feeds regularly, and download any new episodes. This is great if you use a portable media player like an iPod or your phone, as you can easily copy the files over to listen to when you are travelling.

**Things to Consider When Using These Tools**

When you use these tools, you are personally accepting the terms and conditions that come with them, and these will all be different.

One thing to think about is how important it is to be able to download the resources you create. This will depend on how valuable the resources you create are to you, and how likely you are to want to move to another similar service. Feed Readers and Podcast Aggregators have a standard format for exporting and importing subscriptions called OPML. However most tools covered here won’t have standards like that, even though most will allow you to export your content.

We have created a [guide aimed at teachers thinking of using these tools with their students](https://www.exampleguide.com), and this might help you think through some of the risks involved.
Other Sources of Help and support for Staff

- **The ‘Help’ link within the Course Control Panel**
  Click the ‘Help > Blackboard Help’ link within the Course Control Panel at the bottom left of your course to access ‘Blackboard Help for Instructors’.

- **Learning Services Wiki**
  Visit the Learning Services wiki within the GO Portal to access a range of information including, policies, guides and resources.

  **Wiki:** [https://go.edgehill.ac.uk/wiki/display/ls/Home > ‘How do I...? Develop my Learning Edge’](https://go.edgehill.ac.uk/wiki/display/ls/Home)

- **Learning Technology Development**
  Contact the Learning Technology Development if you need further assistance or have any further queries.

  **Email:** ltdsupport@edgehill.ac.uk

  **Telephone:** 01695 650754