The Open Learning Network:
A New, Teacher-sourced Work Paradigm

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Collaboration on program development needs time, which is an already scarce resource in most ELP situations, and inefficient collaboration only makes matters worse. In such places, teachers who are too busy to work together can end up disconnected from each other, and when this happens the critical work of collaborating on program development can only be compromised. However, there are ways that organizations can use new social technologies to connect everyone in open networks in order to promote access to - and effective use of - knowledge and information as tools of equitable and sustainable program development. This paper will explain how the English Language Program (ELP) at ICU in Tokyo is using free online social software services to facilitate increased sharing of curriculum materials and ideas, efficient collaboration on various documents, and automated archiving of program resources. This paper can benefit ELP teachers and educators in general who share an interest in the affordances of social software to realize the power of networks to serve as mutual learning and program development mechanisms.

In 2008 the English Language Program (ELP) at International Christian University (ICU) launched an initiative to leverage the affordances of open networks by adopting the use of free online software services (in particular Google services and Del.icio.us social bookmarking). The initiative aims to strengthen connectivity, communication, and collaboration within the organization, and seeks to achieve more robust curricula and more efficient curricula delivery, towards the overall goal of better educational outcomes for ELP students. In short, to enable the ELP to do a better job more easily. From this point onwards, the *Open Learning Network (OLN)* will be used to refer to this project. Guiding the work in the ELP is the C3 Group, consisting of five members of staff, including the Director and Assistant-Director.

Continuity, Consistency, Efficiency, and Productivity

Over about the last four years, new, zero-install applications which run in the browser have emerged to create an electronic infrastructure, which is commonly referred to as Web 2.0. This infrastructure can connect everyone to everyone else and can be used to create social work systems within organizations. This enables individuals and organizations to work in open and more collaborative ways, which can generate transformative benefits in continuity, consistency, efficiency, and productivity.

In all organizations, effective collaboration is time consuming, but in most ELP situations time is already a scarce resource. Moreover, inefficient collaboration only makes matters worse by creating needless repetition and duplication. This dilemma points to one of the main problems of networks in the real world: too many of the connections that exist between people are hidden.
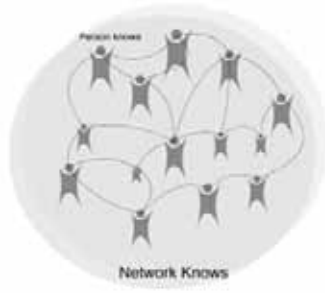
Personal and Public Knowledge (Siemens, 2006)

Critical connections are often not apparent to people other than the principal stakeholders themselves. Consequently, the ELP network has enormous untapped potential, but it is only as valuable as the people and the connections that can be seen. There is emerging opinion that the management of an organization's 'natural resources' including time, information, and knowledge can be effectively addressed by helping individuals coordinate their activities via open social networks (Downes, 2006; Siemens, 2006).

In order for teachers to participate in the ELP network, they need to use online social software services. Use of social applications enables individuals to easily create and share information, to publish, and to collaborate with others in a diverse range of networks distributed across the Web. The 'socialness' of social software derives from these applications residing on the Web and from leveraging the Web to connect different users together in smart, dynamic networks. Social applications interconnect in various ways - by linking, by Rich Site Summary (RSS) for exchanging information, or by Web APIs that enable rich 'conversations' between services. In the ELP, teachers are offered support to develop and use an in-browser personal learning environment (PLE) to get their work done, which consists of selected Google services, the social bookmarking service Delicious, and Rich Site Summary (RSS) technology.

The following information will explain how teachers can get the tools they need and how they can use them to participate in OLN. Hence, this is information can serve as a kind of manual for ELP teachers to follow. Moreover, this manual can serve the needs of members of the wider educational community, who share an interest in the affordances of social software to realize the power of networks for mutual learning and program development. Thus, this

information can assist educators, who may be interested in the ELP's deployment as a model to help them build open networks at their own places of work.

The OLN Manual

Installation Phase: The Personal Learning Environment

The relatively new concept of the PLE is emerging iteratively, but common to all approaches is its use as a way to keep current in today's increasingly dynamic knowledge environment. Stephen Downes neatly describes the PLE as "a tool that allows a learner...to engage in a distributed environment consisting of a network of people, services, and resources" (2006, p. 23). The OLN PLE places a diverse range of learning technologies in the hands of teachers, which they can use to immerse themselves in *their* network for work, professional development, or leisure.

Tool One: Use the Firefox browser to call up Web-based applications. It was only a fairly short time ago that a browser was mostly used to search the World Wide Web and view static pages. It has now developed into a personal work environment that many are beginning to see as a replacement for the computer desktop. Today, day-to-day tasks can be accomplished in the browser by calling to service various zero-install web applications. With a speedy internet connection, these applications have the same responsiveness and capabilities of desktop applications, plus they have the advantages of 'socialness' that derives from residing on the Web. Over the last two years, Firefox has been voted by learning professionals to one of the first two positions on a list of top 100 learning tools (Hart).

1. In your current browser:

English

Click English Windows or point your browser at http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/
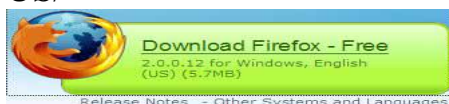
Click English OS X or point your browser at http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/all.html

Japanese

Click Japanese OS X OR Windows or point your browser at http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/all.html

2. Click the 'Download' button for the version you have selected.

Just follow these quick steps to get started:

1. Start the process by clicking Run.

2. Give permission to launch the setup wizard by clicking Continue after the file has downloaded.

3. Follow the steps shown in the setup wizard.

4. Look for the Firefox icon whenever you want to use the web!
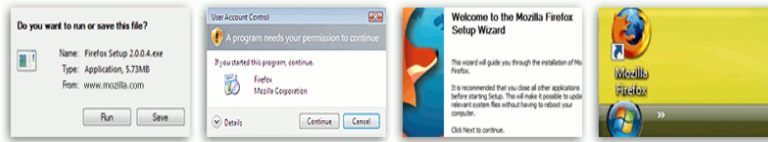
3. Follow the on-screen instructions. It is a straight forward and quick process on any operating system. In Vista on Windows, these four steps are shown opposite.

4. Once you have installed Firefox on your computer, use it for the rest of these steps.

Tool Two: Use a Gmail account as a learning hub. Gmail may be considered the 'beating heart' of the OLN PLE in the sense that it can be a hub or principal node, a hyper-connected location that connects to all other locations in your network.

1. In your new Firefox browser, click here or point your browser at http://www.google.com.
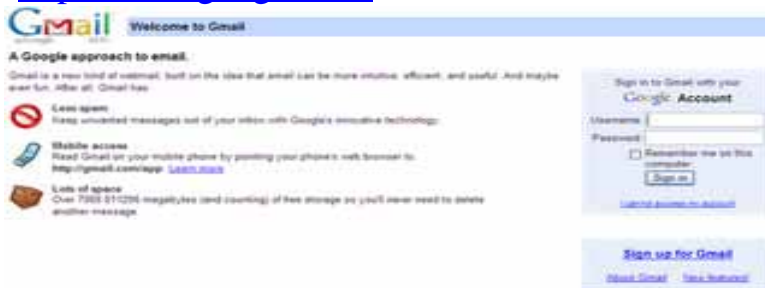
2. Click the Gmail button, top left.

3. Click the "Sign up for Gmail" button, shown bottom right in the image opposite.

4. Follow the directions on the form below to set up your account.

5. Some Gmail tips: Think carefully about what *username* you want to use for this account. For example, some form of your name like wcharshbarger@gmail.com is a little more professional sounding than twinkletoes@gmail.com. Looking ahead, you may want to try and use your Gmail username for Delicious as well. In any case, you will probably have to try different variations of the username you want before you get one that has not already been taken. Also, think about a *password* that can be used for this and other work accounts, such as Delicious. It is probably a good idea to keep this work password different from other passwords you use for personal accounts, especially anything related to banking or finance. To make sure you can remember your new Gmail address and password write them down somewhere safe.

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Tool Three: Use Delicious to save materials to the OLN Courses Database. Delicious was recently voted to Number One on the above same list of top 100 learning tools (Hart). Delicious allows you to collect your bookmarks to a centralized location that is accessible to you and your network (as well as all other users of Delicious), at any computer connected to the Internet. This means that whenever you save something, whether it is an existing web page or a document you have published yourself, it is also saved for the whole network. In other words, *when you know, your network knows.* The *OLN Courses Database*, maintained in Delicious, is where all the ELP course materials and resources will be collected and shared. Whenever you create documents using Google Docs (more on this later) or find web pages that you want to share with other teachers, you will save these items to the OLN Courses Database using tags to describe or classify the pages. *Tagging* is the process of adding keywords or 'tags' to a page, in order to make it easier to find and use that page later. C3 has developed the OLN Tagging Protocol (draft), which is a set of tags representing all ELP courses e.g. elpva (Vocabulary Acquisition), or parts of a course e.g. arwvof (ARW Visions of the Future), and all non-teaching duties e.g. elpsea (ELP Study Exchange Abroad). For full details, please click OLN Tagging Protocol or point your browser at http://tinyurl.com/5hlf7a.

The aggregated collection of items in the OLN Courses Database is available to teachers by subscribing to the RSS feeds generated by Delicious (more on the technicalities of this later). Teachers can select from any of the items in the database and print them off or link to them for use with their own classes. A clear organization-level benefit of using Delicious in this way is that the ELP *has* a database of shared materials, an institutional memory, which is

open, adaptable, reliable, and self-organizing - and that is a fantastic outcome from simply connecting basic work practice. Early outcomes of such connected practice are the ELP ARW Spring (opposite) and ELP ARW Fall homepages, these websites call up resources saved to the OLN Courses Database via Delicious. Each website captures the spirit of cooperation of a group of teachers to contribute to a collaborative website that *makes their work available at the same time that their work is done*. Once the basic setup is done, this kind of website updates itself automatically as teachers use Delicious to save their work to the OLN Courses Database. A webmaster is not required to undertake this usual task, so more time is saved to the ELP. To set up Delicious, you just have to add the Delicious buttons to the toolbar of your browser.

1. In your Firefox browser, click set up a Delicious account, or point your browser at https://secure.del.icio.us/register.

Click the green 'Add Buttons' button.

2. Follow the directions on the form shown opposite to complete your account. Fill out the 'Enter Details' form using your new Gmail address. Delicious will email you confirmation of your new account.

3. Go to Gmail and look for your confirmation email from Delicious. Clicking on the link in that email will automatically redirect you to the 'Install Buttons' page.

4. You are now on the Install Buttons' page, shown below.

5. Look beneath the top edge of your browser window, you will see the message in the yellow box shown in the image opposite, "Firefox prevented this site from installing software on your computer." Click the 'Edit Options' button. On the next screen, click 'Allow', and then 'Close.'

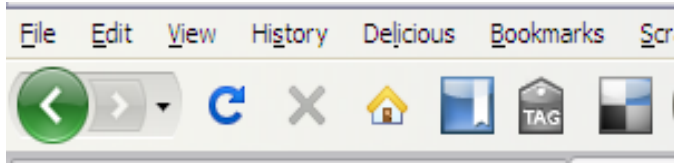6. Click the green 'Add Buttons' button once again. On the next 'Software Installation' screen shown below, click 'Install.'

7. To complete the installation of your Delicious buttons, click the 'Restart Firefox' button shown below.

8. As shown left, your three new Delicious buttons now reside on the Navigation Toolbar.

9. Again, to make sure you can remember your new Delicious username and password, write them down somewhere safe.

Tool Four: Use a blog as course homepage. Blogs are emerging as an easy to use alternative to other more traditional homepages on course management systems (CMS) like Blackboard or Moodle, which are now common installations at universities. Teachers are increasingly looking to blogs to bring them into contact with their students more quickly and easily than through content management systems. Universities and schools have recognized the value in teachers maintaining homepages for each of their courses, which enables the institution to easily see primary evidence of their teachers work and their achievements with students. However, it is most likely that the main benefits of blogs as course homepages are for teachers themselves. Individual teachers can learn to take responsibility for their own identity within the organization and choose how to present themselves to colleagues and students. Having various blogs as course homepages enables individual teachers to present different dimensions of themselves. Such an approach enables professionals to connect their formal education, work, and personal experiences together in new ways in the courses they teach (especially since it is very easy to integrate other Web 2.0 applications and blogs). Mostly, a blog as a course homepage is about connecting you to your students, them to you, your students to each other, and everyone to the materials.

1. Click here to add a blog to your Google account, or point your browser to http://www.blogger.com/

2. Sign in with your same Gmail username and password.

3. You are now on the 'Name your blog' page shown below. In 'Blog title' you can use surname/course/semester, e.g. Pickles ARW Spring. In 'Blog address' you can use ELP Code + course + semester, e.g. pkarwspring. Care is recommended here because you cannot change the URL without creating a new blog.

4. Complete the 'Word Verification' field, and then click the orange 'Continue' button.

5. You are now on the 'Choose a template' page. You only have a limited number of choices here of how you want your blog to look. There are more templates you can select from later after your blog is created. For academic use, C3 recommends a formal, minimal design, with dark text on a light background.

6. Click quickly through the next two screens and finish by clicking the 'View Blog' button in centre position, right-side image below.

7. You will now see your new blog. For easy access later, add this page to your bookmarks in Firefox.

Tool Five: Use Google Docs as a new home for your documents. As teachers, it is relatively easy to get more return on the time we invest in our work by critically selecting the tools we work with. For most teachers these days, this usually means calling to service an expensive, full-featured word processor like MS Word to complete what is typically a pretty simple keyboarding task. It is also worth remembering that when teachers used a typewriter, they never needed to pay to type. There is a simpler and cheaper typing tool than Word. This tool will also assist you in sharing those same documents with other teachers. For most teachers sharing a document has usually meant attaching it to email. This, however, creates multiple copies of a document. Distributing a document to three other teachers, for example, means that the same document exists in four different places. Your experience will tell you that in a variety of instances this can be an awkward outcome. There is a better distribution tool. As well, students nowadays expect course materials to be also available online as a matter of course. Many universities and schools nowadays have a full-featured CMS, which has an extensive range of course management functions, but most teachers seem to use a CMS primarily as a place to publish their word-processor

documents to the Web. There is a far simpler and quicker publishing tool. Teachers can get more value from the time they invest in their work by using one tool, Google Docs & Spreadsheets (GDS). GDS has the capabilities you need to create, share, publish and access your work baked into its DNA.

1. Click GDocs & Spreadsheets, or point your browser at http://docs.google.com. Sign in with your Google username and password.

2. You are now at the GDS Home screen. Having added GDS to your Google list of services, you can click the 'Sign out' button at this point.

Tool Six: Use Google Reader to access the OLN Courses Database. The ELP had a knowledge management problem. The old course materials repository maintained on the network storage device HD272 could no longer be accessed via file sharing on the wired ELP network. However, even a cursory browse through the successive levels of its folder structure revealed a system that had virtually collapsed under its own weight. File names did not have a consistent syntax, which masked connectedness between files. The complexity of the system was made worse by large numbers of files that were near-duplicates of one another, so file redundancy was high. Finding something was typically a laborious process of drilling down through the folder hierarchy, layer after layer, and opening file after file. Working with HD272 had become tedious, frustrating, and very time consuming. The alternative distribution system that emerged in the place of HD272 involved attaching batches of files to email. Distribution by email, however, was repeated year after year: groups changed and it was impossible to keep track of who knew and who did not know, so much of what was distributed the previous year was sent out all over again, or was not distributed, and thus, was effectively 'lost'. Engaging with this system was generally less overwhelming than mining HD272, but it was still inefficient and another thief of teachers' time. What the ELP needed was a new, fast way for teachers to keep up to date with what they needed to know, when they wanted to know it.

Google Reader or GReader is a single website that can let teachers keep up with what is happening in the ELP. GReader enables you to connect to all the curriculum materials and ideas that colleagues (and other distributed members of OLN) have saved to the OLN Courses Database. This includes documents they have created and published to the Web via GDS, as well as web sites they have used or just found interesting. This can work because teachers in the network are willing to syndicate their work by publishing it to the OLN Courses Database via Delicious. Connecting to this syndicated content is called subscribing, which

means that selected streams of new information will come to you, so you do not have to go and get it.

In order to illustrate some of the affordances of syndicating and subscribing, let us assume that you teach Academic Reading and Writing (ARW). Now, most ARW teachers regularly contribute their work to the OLN Courses Database (i.e. GDS documents and other web pages) and you are also evaluating ten or so other web sites related to the current topic. Clearly, to check these sites regularly would take some time, and if there was nothing new, your time would be wasted. An alternative is to use GReader to *automatically* bring updates to you and you can check them all in a single location.

Using GReader to subscribe to selected streams of information from the OLN Courses Database means that you can access the knowledge of the program at a click. Using GReader to bring to you what your network knows, describes not only much about networks, but also networked work. Networked work is social, open, connected, and highly personalized. One clear benefit to time poor teachers in a time poor program like the ELP is the capacity 'social work' affords everyone to capture previously lost time, which can in turn be invested in more productive work. You can quickly get access to the OLN Courses Database by adding GReader to your personal learning environment.

1. Click GReader, or point your browser to www.google.com/reader. Sign in with your Google username and password.

2. At this time, the most useful thing to do is to subscribe to your course pages, in the OLN Courses Database, maintained at Delicious; this is easy to do.

3. In GReader, in the left hand-side pane, click the 'Add subscription' button.

4. To subscribe to all your course pages, firstly check the OLN Tagging Protocol, then enter each of your course feed URLs using this syntax http://delicious/tag/yourcoursetag, just like the URL for Vocabulary Acquisition (elpva) shown in the image above, then click 'Add.'

5. As shown below, GReader immediately returns all the materials available in

the OLN Courses Database, in this case materials for Vocabulary Acquisition. The program 'at a click'!

Deployment

phase: The CSR Protocol

Built as it is on the connected practice of individual teachers, the success of the Open Learning Network requires some changes in individual behaviors and attitudes, as well as some major institutional adjustments. At the individual level, what is required of you is simply this: ***When you create something, share it*** (please). This means that other teachers can have access to your work almost immediately, use it if they wish to, or modify it to create something new, which in turn they will share. This workflow C3 has termed the CSR Protocol: Create - Share - Republish. Here, I will describe a typical work scenario initiated from Google Docs (GDS) that leverages the OLN PLE to get the job done and will help to illustrate the CSR workflow.

Create. In GDS you have created a mixed-media document related to the current topic. You simply want to use the document as a starter for class discussion. 1) You will want to name your document according to the OLN Document Naming Protocol (draft). This protocol aims to encourage clear and consistent naming of artifacts to serve their quick and easy identification by everyone in the network. The structure of the Document Naming Protocol can be parsed as follows using these sample document names:

Identifier	Definer	Descriptor	Author/ Year
ARW	Edvalues:	Meiland – Chapter 2 Comic Summary	(py07)
ALS	Learning Styles:	My Preferred Learning Styles & Strategies	(cr08)

2) To rename your document, go to the File Menu in your open document, select 'Rename' and type the new name in the dialogue box that appears, then click 'OK'.
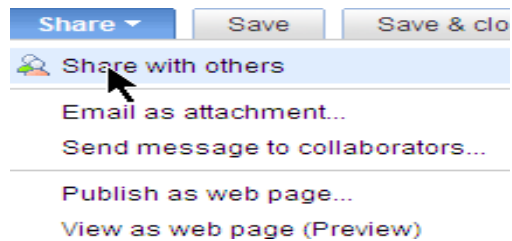

Share. 1) Firstly you want to share your work with your immediate teaching cohort. In the ELP this might be all RCA Program A teachers, or all ASP teachers, the small group of colleagues who are teaching the same course. Click the 'Share' button, select 'Share with others'. 2) As you begin to type the names of the colleagues you want to share the document with, Google will suggest names from your Gmail

contacts list as shown opposite. Click to select the teachers you want. 3) On the same screen, choose whether you want to share with your colleagues as 'collaborators' who can alter the document, or as 'viewers' who can see it, but not edit it.

4) On the next screen, below, you can choose to tell your invitees about your document by writing them a message. A link to the document will be automatically included in the body of your message. You can also instruct GDS to paste the document itself into the email message by checking the respective box. 5) Click the 'Send' button. The document will immediately populate their GDS *and* Gmail inboxes. Alternatively, if all you wish to do is share the document with them - not tell them about it as well – press 'Skip sending invitation' and your document will populate their GDS inboxes only.

Publish 1. Next you want to publish the page for your students. Your students know as part of your normal operating routine you post all class materials to the blog you use for the course homepage. Some students really appreciate this; they can learn what to expect next class and can do some preparation. 1) On your current screen, click the 'Share' button and select 'Publish as web page'. 2) If this is the first post to your homepage, click 'change your blog site settings'. 3) In the 'Blog Site Settings' dialogue box shown below, next to Provider, select Blogger.com from the drop-down menu. Enter your Google username and password. Next, type the title you gave your course homepage when you set up your blog. Finally, click 'OK'.
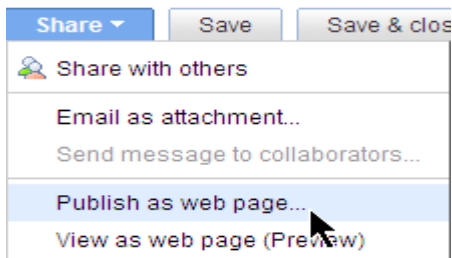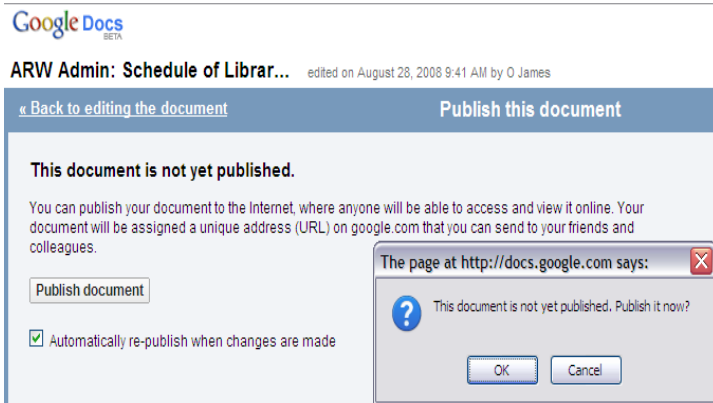
4) Click the 'Post to blog' button shown on the image above. On the next screen that appears, click 'OK'. 5) You will notice that the message 'This document has not been published to your blog', now says 'This document has been published to your blog.' And should you wish to undo what you have just done, you will also notice that a 'Remove from blog' button has appeared.

Publish 2. Finally, you want to publish your page to the OLN Courses Database. Encouraged by the spirit of cooperation that exists in the ELP's social work environment, you always want to make your best work available for your colleagues to use. 1) In your open document in GDS, click the 'Share' button, select 'Publish as web page'. 2) On the next screen, shown opposite, click the 'Publish document' button, then click 'OK'. This action instructs the Google server that hosts your GDS documents to publish your page to the Internet where anyone will be able to access and view it online. 3) On the 'Publish this document' screen, you will notice that the message 'This document is not yet published' now reads 'This document is published on the web.' You will also notice that a 'Stop publishing' button has appeared should you wish to undo this.

Now that your document is published to the world, you can add it to the OLN Courses Database where all shared curriculum materials and ideas are collected. 4) Click the Delicious 'Tag' button you have installed on Firefox's navigation toolbar, shown at position three (3) in the image below.

5) On the Delicious 'Save a Bookmark' dialogue box shown in front position above, you will notice that the URL for your page is already present (position 4), the Title box includes the name of your page (position 5), and there is space for notes (highly recommended) to describe the page for colleagues (position 6). At position seven (7), when you begin to type in the relevant tag or tags you have

selected from the OLN Tagging Protocol, Delicious smartly makes automatic suggestions based on tags that you may have previously used. When you are done, click the 'Save' button (position 9). Your page has now been saved to the relevant category or categories in the OLN Courses Database, where it is available for anyone in the network to select and use in some way.

Getting the job done just described above involved leveraging the CSR Protocol and the social affordances of Firefox, Google Docs, Delicious, and your blog and you have in quick time, I estimate three (3) minutes, achieved these productivity outcomes:

1. Shared your document with your teaching cohort.
2. Published the page to your course homepage blog for students.
3. Published the page to the OLN Courses Database.

These outcomes illustrate the potential of the OLN environment to serve as a mutual learning and program development mechanism.

Conclusion

The Open Learning Network is about connecting people in an open network by encouraging individuals to adopt simple, shared work practices. In making the collective knowledge of the organization available to everyone in the network, mutual learning and ongoing program development is facilitated. The ultimate goal is enhanced educational outcomes for students. However, OLN is not an end in itself. It is an example of an enabling platform, which a particular organization can call on to learn how to remain relevant and vital in a world defined by unprecedented rates of change. Nevertheless, in calling for an intentional approach to Create – Share – Republish workflow using shared tools, to document naming and page tagging according to specific protocols, and for a collaborative approach to creating a courses database, the Open Learning Network seeks to transform work in the ELP. It can establish a truly new work paradigm – a new, teacher-sourced work paradigm - which has the potential for substantial improvements in the productivity and efficiency of individuals and their organization. However, like all collaborative projects, its success will depend wholly on the contributions of its most important elements, the good people themselves.

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