# On the Move: Building a Professional Development Plan That Defies Limits

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## Abstract
The author, a former L2L Project Team Member, set out to use the National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education to develop sustainable and focused professional development (PD) goals that could be adapted with ease to support professional mobility in the constantly evolving library sector. This chapter examines the experiences, methods, and results generated as the author explored a PD framework built for staff and faculty involved in teaching in higher education in Ireland while changing contexts, countries, and roles within the library field. Topics addressed include: the challenges of codifying a broad range of skills and tasks after working in public, school, and academic libraries; the process and impacts of building an e-Portfolio with few models to draw on; the development of scaffolding to support revision of professional development goals as roles change and grow; and unexpected challenges encountered in pursuit of professional progress.

## Introduction
Libraries are a challenging career playground. Oftentimes, the roles we inhabit require us to perform a vast array of different functions, sometimes within moments of one another. For librarians and support staff within libraries, roles can grow and change in unpredictable ways. As a result, the ever-increasing demand for staff to engage with and demonstrate continuing professional development (CPD) can be overwhelming. Which area of skills and tools required to meet and exceed the expectations of our positions are we intended to focus on, exactly? How do we best quantify professional development (PD)? How can we establish PD plans that support us through transitions? Finally, how can we distill the breadth of our abilities into a meaningful and coherent explanation?

When the Library Staff Learning to Support Learners' Learning (L2L) project was first conceptualized in 2016, these were some of the questions that arose in initial discussions. As the team first approached the National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education (2016), we envisioned it as a tool to help guide us in the exploration and development of one facet of our work: teaching and learning. Although most staff in any library can expect some amount of instruction or teaching time, the extent to which these activities make up an individual's duties vary greatly between types of libraries, individual institutions, and countries.

In Ireland, I was a Library Assistant IV at Dundalk Institute of Technology. Like many library assistants, my responsibilities varied from day to day and encompassed a broad swathe of the work that needed to be done in an academic library, from circulation to community engagement efforts to teaching information literacy classes. It was here that I began my journey on the L2L project. From conducting preliminary research to assisting with drafting of the project proposal to initial brainstorming, I was invested and engaged with the project from its inception. Through early-stage surveys, meetings, conversations, we began to collect data, experiences and ideas about the labyrinthine nuances of the role that libraries and the people who work within them play in higher education. It became apparent that anxieties about being so bold as to identify with the role of "teacher" were abundant. As a team, we hypothesised that this could be attributed to the fact that for many of us, teaching and instruction is only a small component of the work we perform. In light of this, I saw a grand opportunity to seek out professional development in a way that targeted multiple facets of work with a common goal that virtually all library staff could agree upon: to "assist in the quality enhancement and assurance of the student learning experience" (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2016, p. 2). The further I read, the more the terminology became secondary to the essence of the Framework, and a natural alignment surfaced. Libraries around the world have embraced models that put their users at the centre, and it made sense that PD planning for staff should acknowledge this.

When I was preparing to return to my native Canada from Ireland in 2017, I was unsure as to what my next position would be. As a library

technician, which is to say the bearer of a two-year Library Information Technology diploma, I needed to reconcile the limitations of my qualification with my professional aspirations. As a result, while on the project I saw the benefit in mapping the structures put forth by the Framework to other aspects of the work I was doing as well as work I had done previously. I strived to create a personal PD plan that focused on broad areas of development and could be easily tailored to new roles and responsibilities. As a library support staffer (i.e. any position outside that of a professional librarian) in the unenviable position of needing a new job, I also saw the need to consolidate, expand, and translate the breadth and depth of my experience into a manageable package. For these purposes, the Framework was a perfect fit. As a library technician lacking specialisation in one type of library or position versus another, developing a cohesive professional development strategy to support shifting roles and environments became essential. It provided the flexibility and focus to reflect on what I wanted to gain from professional development and plan accordingly, even though I might not be a) someone who teaches, or b) in higher education, for much longer.

Following the move, I spent the bulk of an academic year as the sole employee of a junior high library. School library roles in Canada typically involve sole responsibility for all work necessary for the function of the library while simultaneously often requiring minimal qualifications relative to other libraries. Such positions typically offer preference to candidates with a Library Information Technology diploma, but it is rarely required. I have since moved on to a position at the University of Lethbridge where I hold the title Library Operations Specialist III. My position is as yet to be fully defined, as it was created to meet several needs within the library, though the title is applied to positions that fill a range of roles in both the technical and service-based functions of the library. These positions require a combination of a two-year Library and Information Technology diploma from an accredited institution as well as a bachelor's degree in any field, though equivalent experience and education may be considered.

**Background Context**
Areas and levels of library service provided by public, academic, school, and special libraries have diverged significantly over the course of the past few decades. Despite differences between how each group of

library staff and the environment they operate in address the needs of their patron bases, however mandates overlap substantially between these spheres. Ultimately, access to information is the lynchpin which connects them.

In recent decades, as physical collections shrink and digital ones become vast beyond imagination, one of the most intriguing roles is the provision of guidance in navigating this new information climate. While formalised information literacy (IL) and bibliographic instruction have traditionally been the responsibility of accredited librarians, shifts in demand and necessity have blurred lines into what the roles and responsibilities of support staff versus librarians have become. While the degree to which this exists varies between institutions and countries, the work of virtually all staff in the modern library involves some degree of teaching. Whether formal or informal, one-on-one or classroom, with students, colleagues, or member of the public, most of us will be tasked with some kind of instruction in the course of our work.

In spite of this, teaching remains a critically under-addressed skill for library staff who do not explicitly specialise in it. Professional development funding seems to forever be shrinking while the demand for demonstrable investment in PD is growing. As a result, in many institutions, these scarce resources are often allocated principally to staff on the upper levels of the organisation. With that said, insufficient data gathering on the topic means that "it is difficult to establish a clear picture of who, in libraries, gets precisely what" (Neigel, 2017 p.4).

Exacerbating the situation is that "many [library assistants] don't see themselves in a library career - only a library job. They have expressed that they just want to do their job, collect their pay, and go home" (Gillen, 1995, p.8). It is telling that this sentiment, published more than two decades ago, is still echoed in many of our institutions today. One can hardly expect an individual who feels this way about their job to fight for professional development support. As Gillen (1995, p. 8) further explains, "that job …is changing, requiring them to develop new skills. More often than not, those skills are developed, not by formalized library staff development programs, but by repeating the tasks of the job." This is a trend that has continued to gather momentum in the library spheres of both Ireland and Canada, with no signs of stopping.

It is worth noting that while library staff often commit the duration of their working years to their institutions, increased numbers in staffing are seldom seen. As a result, opportunities are often few and far between and the job hunt can feel a lot like a game of musical chairs. Consequently, the sharing of ideas and knowledge risks becoming a closed system fed by top tier staff and administrators rather than the individuals who support them.

This is problematic, as "work is no longer about managing physical collections. Work is about intellectual capacity, emotional engagement, and thought" (Neigel, 2017 p.3). Neigel continues that when scanning job postings, it becomes evident that principal demands for library workers prominently feature "skills that call upon immaterial work including communications, conflict resolution, assignment of work, outreach, and creating and collaborating." (2017, p.3). As so-called 'soft' skills, the development of these areas is largely left to individuals to acquire by any means necessary and without tangible recognition. Despite these conditions, libraries and their staff have seem keen to translate professional development funds into the development of hard skills, particularly tech-oriented ones, in an effort to provide evidence of their learning in a competitive field. Finding a means to quantify and evidence soft skills is infinitely trickier, especially for library support staff.

In light of these realities, much of the onus is placed on the staff themselves-particularly those seeking promotion or new employment - to pursue opportunities for enhancement and track growth independently.

> In response to the growing marketization of education, the expanding precariousness of work, and heightening pressures on the individual, emphasis on professional development for library workers must be considered within the context of complex changes to our social and economic world. (Neigel, 2017 p.6)

In my own case, any PD initiatives I undertake to reflect variations between library settings, countries, and roles. This cornucopia of challenges directly shaped my approach to the Framework.

**Approach**

**Considerations**
My foremost concern was acknowledging the unique blend of responsibilities and duties that characterised my work. As a result, I needed to interpret the Framework in a way that would support all areas of my work equally.

The next consideration was how much of my time, in work and my personal life, I could reasonably devote to a PD plan. Naturally, variance in the amount of time allocated by employers for focused professional development would impact this, so it would be imperative that I develop a strategy to seek out opportunities for growth that would fit neatly into the scope of my existing work. As for any maintenance-type tasks and development not explicitly related to my job, I assumed a time commitment averaging one hour per week.

**Goal Setting**
My initial approach to the Framework was to comb through the document in pursuit of a concrete set of professional goals with multiple pathways to achievement. It needed to be a document that homed in on my broad professional goals while building in enough inherent flexibility that I could quickly and easily revise it in response to changes in my role.

**Process:**
1. In March 2017, I began working through the 5 Domains of the Framework by setting a professional goal based on each element. For each goal set, I subsequently attached a plan to achieve it. Some of these were more general; a lot of the goals I set could be answered with a continued commitment to existing work. Some had short term plans; others long term.
2. From my goals, I isolated several of the key areas of focus. I completed the list in May 2017.
3. When I began a new position in August 2017, I revisited my original goals and revised them. I also attached an update on my progress to each goal.
4. In January 2018, I completed another revision and progress update, with a commitment to fulfill this cycle at minimum every six months.

**Example:**

> 3.1: Development of academic and other forms of writing and enquiry skills to enhance both one's own and students' learning, i.e. academic communication (journal articles, report writing, policy/procedures); general professional communication skills (email, social media), technical communication skills (curriculum/module descriptions, exam/assessment instructions, reports and proposals). (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2016, p. 5)

**Goal:** I want to begin continually contributing to the academic and informal conversations surrounding librarianship, information literacy, and teaching from the perspective of library professionals.

**Plan**: I will attend training on the academic writing process to give myself the confidence and scaffolding to move forward with my ideas. I will aspire to produce at least one piece of writing or conference presentation per year. I will also start blogging informally about library topics that interest me.

**Progress:**
I attended training on academic writing in June 2017. I have been accepted to present sessions at conferences in May 2018 and September 2018. Furthermore, I have strived to update my blog approximately once per month. Though I have fallen short some months, I am determined to recommit to this goal.
My approach encouraged me to seek out opportunities in my day-to-day work. As one example, my goals for element 1.4: Awareness of the extent to which personal philosophy aligns with current institutional, national and international context and associated values, (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2016, p.4) encouraged me to develop a Library Strategic Plan to align with institutional goals where none had ever been created prior to my appointment.

**Workshops**
One of the largest benefits of my involvement in the L2L project was

through the series of workshops which granted some foundational skills in areas like reflective practice, academic writing, and teaching philosophies. Again, my personal aim was devoted to the development of strategies and habits that would be cross-compatible across roles. One of these approaches to sustainable habits was through commitment to blogging about library topics. As an avenue to both reflect on my work and share ideas, it touched on multiple elements of my professional goals. Additionally, it is a tool that can always be outfitted to match whatever work I happen to be doing.

### e-Portfolio

Perhaps the most tangible of my post-L2L outcomes, establishing an e-Portfolio has been of tremendous benefit. The primary challenge was codifying areas of work to build connections between environments and duties. I tackled this by putting together a web space via WordPress where an extended version of my CV, my professional goals, samples of writing and design, my blog, reference letters, training and conference experience, and education could all be held together in one environment. This dramatically simplified the process of CV writing and offered a valuable supplement for potential employers.

### Teaching

Following the completion of an L2L-facilitated workshop with Professor Sheila Corrall on crafting teaching philosophy statements, I constructed a model (Fig 1) to illustrate my own perception of the teacher/learner relationship.
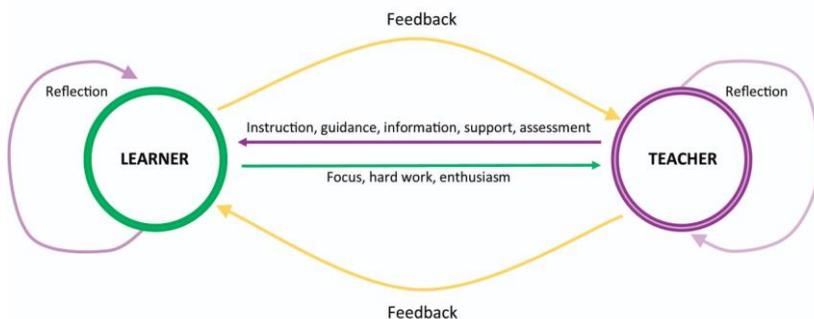


Fig 1 Personal Model of Teacher/Learner Relationship

I used this model as the platform for planning and adapting my own goals and strategies in the realm of teaching.

**Result**

**Conferences**
The combination of skills acquired from L2L and commitment to learning and the dissemination of ideas through goal setting has been especially impactful. I have since presented on an original technique for information literacy instruction design at the Alberta Association of Library Technicians (AALT) Conference in May 2018 (Turner, 2018a) and the Yellowhead Regional Library (YRL) Conference in September 2018 (Turner, 2018b).

Following the YRL conference, I was approached by an instructor at Palomar College in San Marcos, California, and asked to be a guest speaker for their Library Information Technology programme. During my live video presentation in October 2018, I spoke about professional development for support staff in libraries, the impact of L2L in my career development, information literacy instruction, and diversity and representation in libraries.

**e-Portfolio**
I have submitted my CV with a link to the e-Portfolio for several employment competitions since its initial development. As BlogSpot provides metrics, I have been able to see the web traffic increase following such submissions, and deem my results very positive. I estimate a 50% increase in requests for interview following the cultivation of the space, although it would be very difficult to determine how much of that is explicitly due to the site itself.
Interestingly, of the several employers who contacted me after I had submitted a CV, two admitted that they had only briefly skimmed two or three pages. Both of these further divulged that despite this, the existence of the e-Portfolio positively influenced their decision to contact me for interview.

**Teaching**
With permission from the administrators at the junior high school, I was able to construct the aforementioned original approach to IL design, first

conceptualised during my work on L2L. I built, tested, and evaluated two modules on information literacy topics for a teenaged audience. In doing so, I was able to engage with several elements of my Framework goals. I received positive feedback from the teaching staff at the school who expressed intent to continue using the resources although I am no longer employed there.

**Confidence and Vision for Career Future**
Although it was something I had considered previously, my work on the project has left me determined to pursue a master's degree in the subject of library and information science. By exploring my goals, dreams and the limitations of my position as a library support staff member through my work on the L2L project, I have been inspired to create a long term plan for my formally accredited education.
The confidence instilled in me through the workshops and indeed the work of the project itself has been profoundly impactful. More than ever, I feel confident of my competence in all areas of my work and motivated to keep reaching further.

**Conclusion**
The Framework has a flexibility that makes it ideal for someone in a position where teaching is a component rather than the majority of their responsibilities. The Framework provides a pathway through which to examine current practices, marry a complicated array of skills, reflect on the nature of the work we do and the environments we do it in, and plan for ongoing development. By embarking on this pathway, I was able to cultivate a PD plan with longevity beyond a single employer, job, or context. Indeed, this process has also noticeably enhanced not just my work and satisfaction but my marketability as an employee.
The power of L2L lies in its ability to interpret the Framework for library contexts and, in doing so, forge pathways to a more sustainable professional development approach for library staff. This is not only in reference to higher education, but the greater community of academic, public, school, and special libraries, where focused and comprehensive direction for professional development is often hard to find.

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