Personally Managing Your Knowledge

Learning is an individual activity that often happens with and is supported by others. We may learn on our own but usually not by ourselves. Unless we live on a desert island, we learn socially. In looking at how we can make sense of the growing and changing knowledge in our respective professional fields (e.g. Pluto is no longer a planet), I see two parallel processes that support each other. One is internally focused, as in "How do I learn this?" and the other is external, as in "With whom can I learn this?".
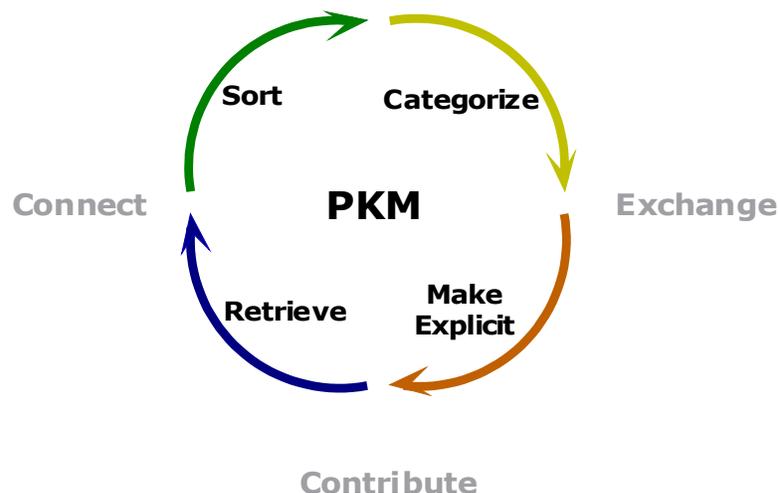
Internally, we go through a process of looking at bits of information and try to make sense of it by adding to our existing knowledge or testing out new patterns in our sense-making efforts. The process I have developed for myself is to:

- Sort,
- Categorize,
- Make Explicit, and
- Retrieve

I have called this my **Personal Knowledge Management** (PKM) system, a term that is not original to me, and is based on the work of many others.

There are also three externally focused activities that I believe complement our internal learning. These are to **Connect**, **Exchange** and **Contribute**.

These internal and external activities are a way of moving from implicit to explicit knowledge by observing, reflecting and then putting tentative thoughts out to our "community".

Looking Outward

"No man is an island entire of himself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main …" John Donne.

Connecting

Connecting is going out and finding out what is happening. It is reading, watching and listening. It is being aware of the flows of conversation that are happening around us all the time. For those of us with access to the digital surround we have no excuses not to connect. Finding conflicting viewpoints on a subject is as easy as going to Wikipedia and reading the comments on any controversial subject. The variety and depth of our connections are indicators of how seriously we take our sense-making efforts. Who you know helps to improve what you know.

Exchanging

We exchange and note ideas and information all of the time. In the age of print we lent out or gave away books, magazines and newspapers. We exchanged opinions, sometime without knowing it. An empty restaurant on a Saturday night may have indicated that the locals did not think it was any good.

Conversations help us make meaning. The quality of our conversations is affected by the quality of the quality of the company we keep. If we seek out interesting people with different ideas we may learn more and broaden our horizons.

A stock exchange is designed to help capital flow and we need to use knowledge exchanges to allow ideas to flow. For centuries, knowledge exchanges were limited to elites but we now have access to world's largest and most open exchange ever created.

Contributing

Clay Shirky has brought up the concept of a cognitive surplus that is a result of the leisure time that we gained about fifty years ago. As a society we were in a state of shock and did not have the tools to deal with all of this time, so television filled the void. Shirky says that television collectively takes up about 200 billion hours in the US per year. Wikipedia only needed 10 million hours to get to where it is today as the leading online encyclopedia. We are poised to be able to contribute to more Wikipedia-style efforts but many of use just don't know how. Our institutions have not prepared us to be ongoing contributors to human knowledge, as we have been led to believe that this is the domain of "experts".

In a connected world it is getting much easier to contribute, whether it be with words, pictures, music, or actions. Not only that, it may be our social

responsibility to be contributors to our common knowledge. How else will you be recognized as a professional in your field unless you are actively contributing to it?

Looking Inward

One of the important aspects of PKM is *triage*, or sorting. It's the ability to separate the important from the useless. Unfortunately, what you may view as useless today could be quite important tomorrow. Developing good triage techniques takes time and practice.

Categorizing

Once you've found something of interest or value, you will need to categorize it. The big change with the Web is that you no longer have to put one object in one file folder, as you did with a physical object or even on your computer desktop. Tags are labels that can be attached to digital knowledge objects and an objects can have many labels. That means that you can have as many categories as you want.
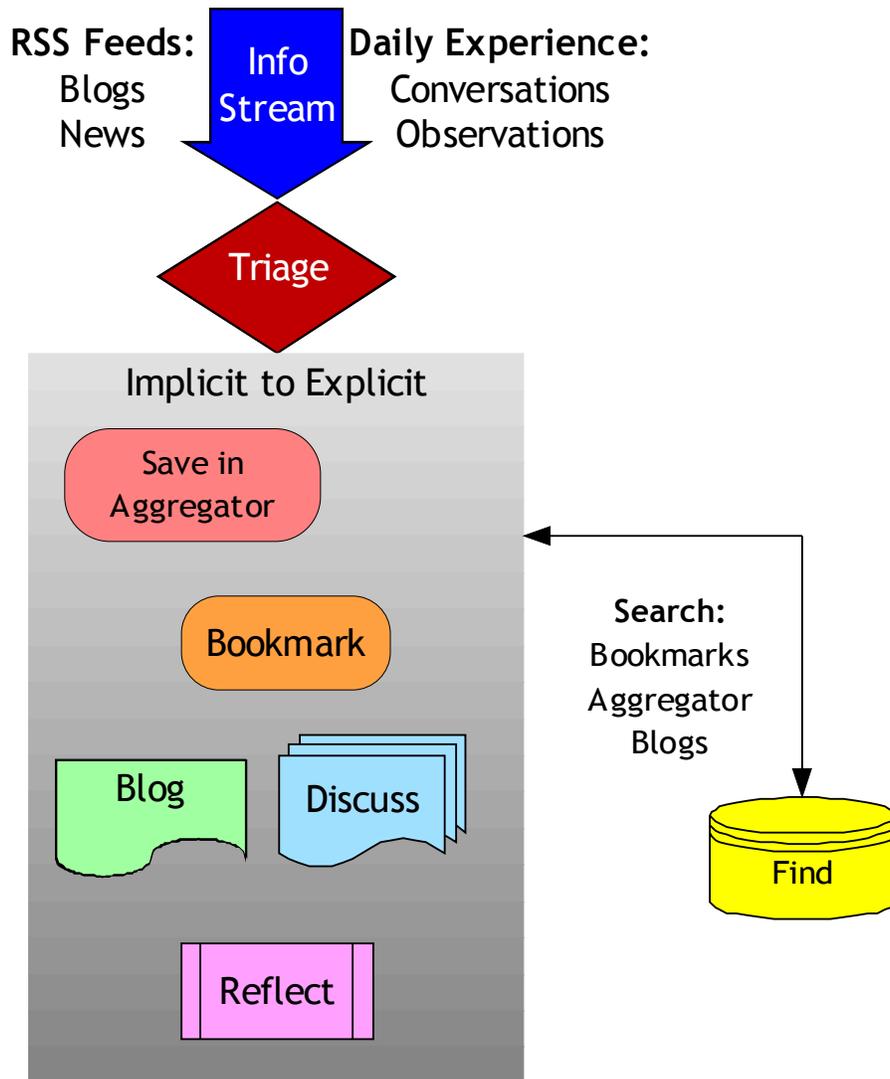
Making Explicit

There are many ways of making knowledge explicit. You can talk about it, write about, engage in debate, create a video or even develop a hypothesis. The act of making it explicit provides the discipline necessary to examine your thought processes.

Even more powerful than making your knowledge explicit is to make it public. This can start some interesting conversations about things that matter to you. Going public makes your professional knowledge much more personal. It also encourages peer discussions and reinforces the outward looking aspect of personal knowledge management.

The importance of retrieval becomes more obvious with the passing of time. As years of sorting, categorizing and making explicit develop into a large amount of information you can begin to see its value. These are your thoughts and ideas but they are connected to the ideas that sparked them and have been reinforced or questioned by your peers. The great benefit is that you can retrieve your knowledge artifacts (or information that has special meaning to you) anytime and anywhere. That's quite a powerful professional asset.

Tools

This is an example of an online PKM process:

RSS Feeds: Info **Daily Experience:**
Blogs   Stream   Conversations
News   Observations

Triage

Implicit to Explicit

Save in
Aggregator

Bookmark

Blog   Discuss

Search:
Bookmarks
Aggregator
Blogs

Find

Reflect

Tools	Examples	Inward Support	Outward Support
Aggregator	Bloglines Google Reader	Sorting Categorizing	Connecting
Social Bookmarks	Delicious Magnolia	Categorizing	Connecting Exchanging
Micro-blogging	Twitter Jaiku	Sorting	Connecting Exchanging
Blog	Wordpress Blogger	Making Explicit	Contributing
Photo Sharing	Flickr Photo Bucket	Sorting Categorizing Making Explicit	Exchanging Contributing
Social Networking	Facebook LinkedIn	Making Explicit	Exchanging Contributing

What I have found out over several years of using PKM methods and tools is that I have been creating a powerful resource. My annotated bookmarks and my blog are the first places I search when I have an article or report to write. My PKM process has given me a digital library brimming with my own sticky notes that I can easily find.

References:

Dave Pollard http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2005/11/23.html#a1349

Lilia Efimova http://blog.mathemagenic.com/2004/02/16.html#a1089

Clay Shirky http://www.herecomeseverybody.org/