THE ROLE OF PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Knowing how to exploit social media for professional development is one of the hallmarks of the connected teacher. According to Buzzetto-More (2012) "Today's change agents…have a particular talent for launching and promoting new sub-networks by fostering introductions and connections between people" (p. 8). Social media are increasingly playing a pivotal role in education and are bound to continue shaping the practices of teachers for the foreseeable future. Teachers' ability to harness the potential of social media for professional development purposes is crucial. Knowing how to create a PLN involves a set of skills that can be developed by means of appropriate training that targets not only teachers' competences but also their attitude towards the contribution that social media can make to their CPD.

By means of the results of a small-scale study involving a group of teachers who participated in a training workshop on the use of social media, this chapter seeks to show that teachers can be encouraged to appreciate that the tools they use routinely for personal reasons also have latent qualities that make them ideal for achieving professional growth.

2. PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

The concept of a PLN is not new, however, over the past few years the reach, size and look of a PLN have changed due to the proliferation of social media. Thanks to social media, teachers are finding it much easier to create networks whose main purpose is that of facilitating CPD. A social network is of fundamental importance to professional development (Levin & Cross, 2004)

and by encouraging teachers to build an extended network they are enabled to implement innovative practices (Dresner & Worley, 2006). Knowing how to use social in order to build a PLN is a twenty-first century skill for teachers because it empowers them to feel in charge of their professional development and thus extend learning (Rosenthal Tolisano, n.d.). The benefits of social media like Facebook and Twitter in allowing teachers to set up a PLN are widely recognised (Grayson, 2012; Joosten, 2012) and it seems that such "Cyber-enabled networks hold great promise for supporting teachers' development of new knowledge and practices" (Schalger, Farooq, Fusco, Schank, & Dwyer, 2009, p. 87). A PLN is defined as "an adult's own assemblage of resources and means of assimilating knowledge from those resources" (Neubauer, Hug, Hamon, & Stewart, 2011, p. 14). A PLN is based on the idea that learning is ongoing and seeks to provide tools to support that learning. It also recognises the role of the individual in organising his or her own learning [which] will take place in different contexts and situations and will not be provided by a single learning provider. (Attwell, 2007, p. 1)

A PLN is constituted of a group of people who guide individual teachers in their learning, act as a source of advice and resources, and share best practice (Rosenthal Tolisano, n.d.).

According to Hanraets, Hulsebosch and de Laat (2011) "People use their networks as a social infrastructure to gain access to what it is they are looking for whether it is products/materials, knowledge and new colleagues (p. 86). Downes (2007) identifies four main characteristics of learning networks: diversity, autonomy, connectedness, and openness. In order for individual entities within a learning network to maximize their learning they need to be exposed to as wide a range of influences as possible, be able to operate independently of other entities, produce knowledge through interaction with others, and openly contribute to and receive knowledge from the network (Downes, 2007). One proposed "sequence of use" for a PLN consists of the following steps: "catch, read, think, write, post, and serve" (Neubauer et al., 2011, p. 15). This sequence seems to highlight the significance of shared knowledge, which seems to be one of the main advantages of a PLN for teachers.

A PLN allows teachers to sift through a vast wealth of information and focus only on what appeals to them. It enables teachers to access this information whenever and wherever they are and to determine who and what should form part of their PLN. Hence a PLN is tailor-made for each teacher's use. One of the main benefits derived by teachers' use of social media is that of having access to shared knowledge that is specific to their own needs and interests.

The immediate effect of a PLN is that teachers are able to dynamically contribute and share innovative ideas with a network of people that extends beyond the physical confines of the classroom. In fact, Baird and Fisher (2005) affirm that "Social networking media engages the user in the content and allows them to be included as an active participant as they construct a learning landscape rooted in social interaction, knowledge exchange, and optimum cognitive development with their peers" (p. 24). In line with this idea, Luehmann and Tinelli (2008) found that teachers' use of blogging facilitated the creation of a knowledge sharing community and the development of reform-based practices. Amongst the different professional reasons for which educators use Twitter, Veletsianos (2011) found that information sharing is of primary importance. They tend to use Twitter to distribute material that is linked to their professional practice and to share information about their teaching context. Talking about his own professional development via social media, Peachey (2012) says that "Sharing is a really important part of the process. It's important because if you create something of value that can help you develop it can probably help others develop too."

The concept of a PLN envisions cadres of connected teachers who are constantly in tune with the most recent developments in their field and who are always willing to share knowledge with their peers for the purpose of professional development. This necessitates a conception of the connected teacher as someone who is plugged into an ongoing act of learning. As Agostinelli, Campillo, Magnoler and Rossi (2011) point out, "To give and share on the social networks, it is also necessary to amalgamate time. Didactic time and personal time no longer constitute separate spheres" (p. 783). Connected teachers thus use social media to network with a wide variety of educators, ask for assistance from fellow educators, and provide others with advice (Veletsianos, 2011). This is in line with Madhusudhan's (2012) research, which shows that

for educators the main benefit of using social media seems to be collaborative and peer-to-peer learning.

3. THE STUDY

The study made use of a mixed methods approach and it involved 60 teachers of English working in state secondary schools all over Malta. These teachers are responsible for students who are typically aged between 14 and 16. As part of this study the teachers attended a four-hour in-service training workshop on the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) for professional development purposes. The workshop was held twice, with half the total number of participants attending on each day. At the start of the workshop they were asked to complete an online survey on their use of social media for personal and CPD purposes. The workshop mainly focused on providing the participants with hands-on training in the use of Facebook and Twitter for professional development. During the workshop the trainer made a note of some of the comments made by the trainees whilst learning how to use these SNS. At the end of the workshop semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants whose teaching experience ranged from two to twenty years. These interviews were aimed at better understanding teachers' current and future use of social media. The interviews were conducted in a one-to-one manner.

4. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

The teachers declared that social media is an important (53.3%) or very important (30.0%) part of their CPD, with the majority of them (63.3%) spending between one and five hours per week accessing social media for professional development. All the teachers intended to continue making use of social media for CPD purposes in the future. Three quarters of them indicated they will use it more often than now while the remainder said they will maintain the same frequency of use.

The most common social media for CPD purposes amongst these teachers are YouTube (81.6%), Facebook (40.0%), LinkedIn (10.0%), and blogs (10.0%). YouTube seems to be a staple part of how some teachers acquire new knowledge

and skills relevant to their subject and profession. In fact, in the words of one of the interviewed teachers, "YouTube clips are an integral part of how I learn new things about English teaching" (Teacher B, henceforth TB).

The fact that the purposeful use of some social media registered low percentages might suggest that there is not yet sufficient awareness amongst teachers about the potential of such tools. In fact, three interviewed teachers indicated that they never thought about using SNS for this purpose as they "usually have Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family" (TB). SNS are a means of "chatting with people about all sorts of things but not work honestly" (TE), especially because "not all my friends are teachers or interested in English" (TE). One teacher claimed that in-service courses and staff meetings "feel more than enough sometimes with all that we discuss in them" (TG). However, there seemed to be consensus on the fact that they "never considered that social networks can be used for this" (TE). They also indicated that "training is about e-twinning and such stuff but not Facebook for sure" (TB). This acts a reminder of the idea that "There are deep incompatibilities between the demands of the new technologies and the traditional school. Technology…requires new skills that teachers often have not learned in their professional development" (Collins & Halverson, 2009, p. 6).

Another five teachers claimed that they use social media for CPD on a regular basis because "there is so much you can learn from others" (TD) and so much an individual "can share not only with Maltese teachers but also ones abroad" (TH). The "sharing of information is essential" (TF) for them, as is "the possibility to network with so many teachers from all around the globe for free" (TC). These teachers value "the network you create for your own particular needs" and which is used to "learn and grow as a teacher" (TA). One interviewee suggested that "a teacher needs to take the reins and learn how to do it…it's not the kind of thing they show you in the in-service" (TH). It seems clear that besides a teacher's personal motivation to start using social for professional development there is also a need for training, not only in how social media may be used for such purposes but also with the aim of convincing teachers as to why these tools should be used.

5. WHY USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

The reasons for which some teachers use social media for professional development correspond to the most significant features of a PLN. The most common reason mentioned by teachers was that social media allow them to network with local and international peers with the purpose of sharing ideas. Other very popular reasons given were the relevant material made available thanks to one's network, the learning potential of a network made up of teachers, and the fact that social media allow them to keep up-to-date with the latest trends in their field.

Five of the interviewed teachers agreed that their use of SNS not only allowed them to network with others but also gave them "a sense of belonging" (TF) or "our common identity" (TC). They feel they "know the other teachers wherever they are based...we're all in this for the same goals" (TD). Talking about the teachers whom he interacts with by means of SNS, one particular interviewee explained that "they're there to help me learn and I do the same for them" (TH). Another teacher showed she agreed with this idea by claiming, "I feel I'm contributing something. It's a process of give and take and it's amongst colleagues who also become friends" (TA). It seems clear that these teachers are aware of the advantages of being connected teachers who not only consume knowledge but most importantly share knowledge with others. This seems to be in line with the idea that digital technology allows contemporary learners to be not just consumers but also creators (Wiley & Hilton, 2009). Moreover, these teachers seem to recognise the fact that this shared knowledge is for the benefit of a learning community consisting of people with similar objectives.

6. CONCLUSION

The ubiquity of social media in most social domains means that the educational sphere is most likely to continue being influenced for many years to come. Social media are having an impact on how students and teachers engage in the learning process and this means that the way individuals acquire knowledge and skills is

changing in order to capitalise on the potential of these new tools. Teachers are realising that they have to expand their view of what counts as a valid means of CPD in order for them to be able to harness the power of the resources they use on an everyday basis. Social media allow teachers to extend the reach of their previously restricted PLN and to have constant access to relevant knowledge that they are encouraged to disseminate as widely as possible. A PLN provides teachers with a highly effective means of professional development that despite being conducted in a digital manner is still promoting the value of collaboration for the attainment of a common goal.

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