

12.9 PLN: teachers' use of social media for professional development

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Benefits of a PLN

The concept of a personal learning network (PLN) is not new; however, over the past few years the teach, 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 to facilitate the process of continuing professional development (CPD). The benefits of social media like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter in allowing teachers to set up a PLN are widely recognised, and it seems that such 'cyber-enabled networks hold great promise for supporting teachers' development of new knowledge and practices' (Schalger *et al.* 2009: 87). One of the main benefits derived by teachers' use of social media for CPD 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 their school.

Using social media for CPD

The concept of a PLN served as the basis of a small-scale study involving 60 teachers of English working in state secondary schools all over Malta. Its aim was to explore teachers' use of social media for CPD purposes. The teachers were asked to complete an online survey; subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants.

The fact that for these teachers CPD is either 'very important' (65 per cent) or 'important' (35 per cent) shows that they value the benefits accrued from engaging in professional development activities. However, only 10 per cent of the teachers specified that for them the most effective form of CPD is using social media with the express purpose of attaining professional growth. This might suggest that most of these teachers have not yet fully embraced the idea that 'The digital era opens unprecedented opportunities to expand [their] traditional learning experience by participating in networked spaces where sharing and reciprocity are expected' (Nussbaum-Beach and Ritter Hall 2012: 13). Nonetheless, the majority of these teachers (63.3 per cent) spend between one and five hours per week accessing social media for professional development.

The two most common social media for CPD purposes amongst teachers are YouTube (81.6 per cent) and Facebook (40.0 per cent). These were followed by LinkedIn (10.0 per cent), blogs (10.0 per cent), Google Reader (7.0 per cent), and Twitter (3.3 per cent). YouTube seems to be a staple part of how some teachers acquire new knowledge and skills relevant to their subject and profession. However, the fact that the purposeful use of other forms of social media for CPD registered much lower percentages might suggest that there is not yet sufficient awareness among teachers about the potential of such tools. In fact, three of the interviewed teachers indicated

that they never thought about using certain social networks for this purpose as they 'usually have Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family'. They also suggested that in-service training does not usually address this gap in their knowledge and skills.

The other five interviewed teachers claimed that they use social media for CPD on a regular basis because 'there is so much you can learn from others' and so much an individual 'can share not only with Maltese teachers but also ones abroad'. The 'sharing of information is essential' for them, as is 'the possibility to network with so many teachers from all around the globe for free'. These teachers value 'the network you create for your own particular needs' and which is used to 'learn and grow as a teacher'. Highlighting the inefficacy of current training, 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'.

Conclusion

A PLN allows connected teachers to be constantly in tune with the most recent developments in their field and enables them to share knowledge with their peers for the purpose of professional development. The above data seems to confirm the idea that 'while participating in these online spaces may appear easy, creating a PLN is in fact a highly complex intellectual and emotional task' (Richardson and Mancabelli 2011: 19). It seems clear that besides a teacher's personal motivation to start using social media for professional development there is also a need for adequate training, not only in how social media may be used for such a purpose but also with the aim of convincing teachers as to why these tools should be used.

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References

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12.10 CPD for young teachers: pedagogical internship in ELT

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Background

The paper presents a scaffolding CPD scheme for novice teachers of English. Taking into account the difference between a novice teacher and an expert teacher (Richards and Farrell 2005), our university started a project, Pedagogical Internship, designed to help starting teachers to increase confidence and to encourage self-development.