



## Moving beyond silos: professional learning networks in higher education



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### ABSTRACT

Many faculty and staff in higher education have turned to digitally-enhanced professional learning networks (PLNs) as a means for situated learning that can help them grow in their various professional responsibilities. However, there is scant research on what these PLNs mean to the professional lives of higher educators. We report findings of a qualitative study that investigated participants' perspectives on their PLN experiences through analysis of survey data from 151 higher education faculty and professionals. Data analysis suggested that the anytime, anywhere availability of expansive PLNs, and their capacity to respond to educators' diverse interests and needs, fostered new learning experiences. Participants reported that their PLNs supported professional growth, specifically in the areas of teaching and learning. These findings have implications for defining the present and future of faculty learning and development in a digital age.

### 1. Introduction

Work in higher education is often highly specialized and competitive in nature, which can foster an isolating environment that hinders the growth of faculty and staff. As higher educators' roles, responsibilities, and commitments evolve, they need support to develop and improve their practice (e.g., Kukulka-Hulme, 2012). In the past, geographic and temporal factors have constrained opportunities to collaborate with colleagues with similar roles or expertise. However, widespread access to the Internet and social media has afforded new learning opportunities that can transcend traditional boundaries.

As a result, some higher education faculty and professionals have turned to social media to create *professional learning networks* that extend beyond their face-to-face contacts. We define these professional learning networks (PLNs) as unique “systems of interactions made up of people, spaces and tools that support learning and professional growth” (Krutka, Carpenter, & Trust, 2017, p.2). While there is research on faculty uses of specific social media for scholarship (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012; Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017) and teaching (e.g., Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013; Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013), there has been no prior research on the PLNs of faculty and higher education professionals. As more higher educators develop PLNs to grow their craft in collaboration with others outside of their local networks, it is important to understand how these professionals construct their PLNs and how PLN activities shape their learning and practice, as well as

their students' learning. By examining PLN engagement and the impact of PLNs on teaching and learning, we can identify ways to support and empower higher education faculty and professionals to develop networks that positively shape their practice. Therefore, for this study, we collected survey data that would help us examine and understand higher educators' PLN engagement and influence.

### 2. Relevant literature

#### 2.1. Situated learning theory

Both in theory and practice, professional learning in higher education is traditionally understood in terms of explicit instruction or training in which individuals acquire knowledge from workshops, seminars, courses, or conferences (e.g., Steinert et al., 2017). However, such methods and theories can be insufficient to explain the more organic social learning in which many higher education professionals engage in a time when technological affordances have influenced the ways we think, access information, and connect with others (Siemens, 2005). Horizontal self-organization around affinities can allow for both individual expertise and distributed knowledge to foster informal learning (Gee, 2004). Numerous educational theorists have posited that the concept of situated learning can help us understand professional learning as occurring within particular contexts (Korthagen, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 2000). There are particular benefits when those contexts are social, and knowledge is distributed

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among participants. In such engagements, and in contrast to many formal learning arrangements, learners pursue shared interests in interactive learning systems where activities are authentic for individuals and groups. Individual learning cannot be separated from the learning environment in which it is gained, as participants both shape, and are shaped by, the ecosystem. Reasons for engagement often shift over time as participants' knowledge, needs, and aims change with their careers.

While situated learning can certainly be enacted in face-to-face environments, higher educators have increasingly engaged in online professional learning (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013; Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003). In digital spaces, learning experiences are mediated by the affordances, biases, and limitations of any platform, but these online spaces can also offer access to resources and dialogues that might not be available in local contexts.

In particular, social media platforms that are important to most PLNs, such as Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, and Facebook, serve as portals that allow educators to enter affinity spaces for learning around common interests. As an example, teacher educators with varied skills and expertise affiliate around the #teacheredchat hashtag through the Twitter portal to engage in dialogue to improve their abilities to prepare pre-service teachers for the field. Regular participants in the hour-long, live #teacheredchat Monday chat (see Luo, Sickel, & Cheng, 2017 for research on Twitter chats) bring with them a tacit knowledge of how to engage in professional learning in this virtual environment by sharing ideas and resources, welcoming newcomers, and supporting participants among other activities (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014). In such spaces, there are various means of participation, including chat organizers, moderators who tweet questions, participants who respond to questions and peers' responses, and even lurkers who simply read or "like" tweets. Leadership within Twitter chats is porous and shifting based on what people can contribute and desire to learn. Each participant shares their specialized expertise developed through years of teaching, learning, research, or tweeting, but a more extensive or general knowledge is also valued and shared broadly. Through participation, higher education professionals not only grow in their individual knowledge but contribute to a collective knowledge that is evident on the hashtag feed and dispersed to chat archives, participant blog posts, and projects that extend beyond the Twitter realm. While professional learning in affinity spaces holds promise, educators and researchers must critically reflect on the effectiveness within affinity spaces and their own professional learning networks (Krutka, Carpenter, et al., 2017).

## 2.2. Professional learning networks

Professional learning networks, also sometimes known as "personal learning networks," (Digenti, 1999; Tobin, 1998) consist of people, spaces, and tools that support professional growth (Krutka, Carpenter, et al., 2017). PLNs include people who can offer feedback, ideas, emotional support, and collaboration opportunities. Because each PLN is uniquely defined to support personalized learning, the range and types of people in educators' PLNs vary widely. One educator's PLN may include primarily individuals who teach the same subject, while another individual's PLN may feature people who offer diverse perspectives about the broad field of education. PLNs also rely on the spaces in which educators can connect and learn with others. These may be face-to-face spaces, such as conferences and coffee shop meetups, or virtual spaces, such as Twitter chats and Facebook groups. Through their PLNs, educators are able to access cognitive tools, such as ideas, information, and perspectives about teaching and learning, as well as technological tools, such as online websites and videos, that they can use to grow their craft (Krutka, Carpenter, et al., 2017; Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016).

Although the concept of a PLN is not new (e.g., Lalonde, 2009), the rise in popularity of social media has afforded educators greater opportunities to cultivate PLNs that span across traditional spatial,

temporal, and institutional boundaries. Originally, the term "personal learning network" referred to colleagues and tools (e.g., user manuals) in the workplace that could provide support, information, and help (Tobin, 1998). However, in the past decade, "new technologies such as the Internet have extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities" (Wenger, 2006, para. 22). Kukulka-Hulme (2012) noted that in higher education settings, new technologies are "breaking down traditional barriers separating academic research from teaching, work-based learning and informal learning" (pp. 247–248). With social media, professionals' learning opportunities are no longer limited by their local networks or contexts. Instead, individuals can connect and learn with others who they have never met in face-to-face settings. They can share their expertise with and solicit feedback from a broad public audience. Also, with the abundance of information available through social media, professionals may discover exciting, relevant new information, connections, and opportunities that they were not originally seeking. These serendipitous learning experiences can foster creative and critical thinking (e.g., Kop, 2012). Thus, social media can be used to both expand PLNs and facilitate new learning experiences.

The majority of prior research related to PLNs has been situated in K-12 settings. These studies often focus on teacher learning in a single network or online community (Trust, 2012; Gesthuizen, 2012; Linton, 2016; Seo, 2014; Visser et al., 2014). We (Trust et al., 2016) conducted one of the first large-scale studies of K-12 teachers' PLNs. We found that K-12 teachers' PLNs in our sample were uniquely defined, dynamic systems that can shift and grow based on the individual's needs, interests, and goals. Many of our findings aligned with previous research about teacher learning in online networks and communities. Specifically, teachers engage in these online spaces to find, exchange, and construct knowledge (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012; Hew & Hara, 2007), collaborate (Seo, 2014; Seo & Han, 2013), develop social capital (Ranieri, Manca, & Fini, 2012), and even receive emotional support (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Visser et al., 2014). We also found that PLNs can support professional growth in affective, social, cognitive, and identity aspects of teaching.

While researchers have not yet explored higher education faculty and staffs' PLN activities or experiences, scholars have examined the use of social media in higher education (e.g., Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Manca & Ranieri, 2016a; Stewart, 2015a). According to survey data from 7969 faculty, the majority of faculty (70%) use social media for personal reasons; a little more than half (55%) use social media professionally, and approximately 41% use social media for teaching and learning (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013). In terms of professional social media activities, research suggests that faculty utilize social media to acquire professional knowledge (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017), share information, ideas, and resources (Veletsianos, 2012), engage in social scholarship (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014), ask for and offer advice (Veletsianos, 2012), draw attention to their work and manage their digital reputations (Shah, Shabgahi, & Cox, 2016; Stewart, 2015b), belong to a professional community (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017), and network with other professionals (Veletsianos, 2012; Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017). While administrators and staff tend to use social media accounts (e.g., institutional Twitter accounts) to disseminate information (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2012; Kimmons, Veletsianos, & Woodward, 2017), some college and university staff reported using social media to support students, build community, and expand connections (Davis et al., 2012; Junco, 2014). Many faculty and staff do, however, express some concerns related to professional use of social media, including issues related to privacy (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013), defining personal and professional boundaries (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), and the appropriateness of these media for teaching activities (Manca & Ranieri, 2016b).

Researchers have explored uses of social media for teaching and learning in higher education settings (e.g., Carpenter, 2015; Krutka,

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