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Sharing repertoires in a teacher professional Facebook group

Annika Lantz-Andersson*, Louise Peterson, Thomas Hillman, Mona Lundin,
Annika Bergviken Rensfeldt

Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Box 300, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

1. Introduction

A commonly held view is that teachers' professional development is the primary vehicle for improving teaching and learning practices (e.g. Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010; Petty, Heafner, Farinde, & Plaisance, 2015). Although effective classroom practice is the desired outcome of professional development initiatives, teachers have long reported perceptions of professional development efforts as “fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant to the real problem of their classroom practice” (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010, p. 77, see also Borko, 2004; Petty et al., 2015). Earlier research on teachers' professional learning has shown that both process and outcomes of such initiatives are unpredictable as variations in the activities undertaken unfold over time. For example, Bourke, Mentis, and O'Neill (2013) studied an assessment initiative that was broadly introduced in the New Zealand Ministry of Education. They concluded that “teacher learning efforts are likely more often than not to take on a life of their own, and that this may be perfectly desirable, if not essential, where the problems of practice are themselves complex and their resolution needs to be open to constant trial, error and peer review” (p. 276).

Furthermore, prevailing formats for teacher professional development are often problematic and rather than engaging teachers in collaborative and collegial learning activities, all too often one-day workshops or short-term training conferences are held to fulfil school accountability measures and fail to have long-term impact on teacher effectiveness (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009). With this background, researchers have attended to collegiality as an important aspect of teacher professional development for almost 30 years. Key among the findings of this work is that those teachers that plan, work and struggle together over time are committed not only to each other but also to further professional growth (e.g., Little, 2002).

During the last decade, an increasing number of teachers have initiated and become engaged in pedagogical discussions outside organised competence development efforts in various online communities (e.g., Hicks & Turner, 2013; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010; Macià & García, 2016; Rodesiler, 2015). Particularly in social media communities such as Facebook, teachers engage in collegial discussions and share experiences related to their profession more publicly than in other professional discussion arenas. However, teacher discussion in self-organised professional online communities is still relatively unexplored. A recent review concluded that to date studies within this area have been mainly based on small case studies that take normative accounts of teachers' professional development as points of departure (Macià & García, 2016).

In this study we address the need to unpack social media discussion as a relatively new form of teacher professional development by examining the repertoires and norms that become established in one of the largest Swedish language self-organised professional social media groups. In this group, mainly middle and secondary school teachers discuss the Flipped Classroom approach. The basic idea of ‘flipping the classroom’ is that teachers prepare instructive media content (usually videos) for students to individually engage with as preparation before attending class. This preparation work is intended to save classroom time and, as a result, free time for teachers to address student problems and knowledge gaps. The international movement around the flipped classroom approach can be described as a teacher-led initiative oriented to knowledge and curriculum content, as well as to changing classroom practice (Fulton, 2012). The goals of the movement can be described as harnessing technology to offer new possibilities for learner-centred

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: annika.lantz-andersson@ped.gu.se (A. Lantz-Andersson), louise.peterson@ped.gu.se (L. Peterson), thomas.hillman@gu.se (T. Hillman), mona.lundin@gu.se (M. Lundin), annika.bergviken-rensfeldt@ped.gu.se (A. Bergviken Rensfeldt).

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activities, enhancing active student learning and teacher expertise (Sams & Bergmann, 2013). In many ways, the movement aligns with established historical traditions of educational IT use (Koschmann, 1996) by connecting to both instructive, student-centred and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. The Flipped Classrooms (FC) focused Facebook group that is the object of this study serves as a particularly relevant example of a broader trend towards informal social media professional development activities since the FC movement itself relies extensively on the internet for communication among teachers who share their experiences online through social media (Sams & Bergmann, 2013; Strayer, 2012). Importantly, however, rather than focusing on the FC approach itself, the analysis in this study is instead concerned with the features that distinguish a teacher professional social media group in terms of the kinds of discussions that emerge and the repertoire that becomes established.

Theoretically, the examination described in this paper is underpinned by assumptions about learning as situated in the sense that it is developed through activities where people interact with each other. Data was collected by programmatically assembling a corpus of all the activity in the Facebook group over a three-year period. Analysis of the resulting corpus is broadly based on frame theory derived from Goffman's (1974) micro sociological and interactional perspective, but involves several steps including computational content analysis to identify particularly relevant discussion threads for detailed analysis. More specifically, we ask the following research questions:

- What kinds of discussions emerge in the teacher professional Facebook group?
- What repertoires, i.e. norms, skills, and competences, are established?
- What does this imply in terms of how the teachers perform impression management (Goffman, 1974) through moment-by-moment online interactions?

In the following sections we first review previous research on teacher professional development in social media. Thereafter, the theoretical, methodological and analytical underpinnings of the study are elaborated, and finally, the findings followed by a discussion of their implications.

2. Background

2.1. Previous research on teachers' professional development in social media communities

A general impression that emerges from the findings of studies on teacher professional social media discussions is that they are perceived by teachers as spaces for receiving support, often in the form of sharing practical teaching ideas (e.g. Booth, 2012; Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2014; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Macià & García, 2016; Petty et al., 2015; Rodesiler, 2015). One such example is a study of English teachers' professional participation online in which Rodesiler (2015) examined the teachers' interactions in various social media communities. The findings show that the most important aspect was the establishment of a supportive community. Additional important aspects were the possibility for promoting one's own online content and educational material, as well as curating ideas and information generated by others.

In another study, Goodyear et al. (2014) analysed the interactions of five Physics teachers' and a facilitator on Facebook and Twitter over a two-year period. The study showed that social media operated as a communicative space where the teachers were challenged to develop their current uses of technologies and develop shared practices. Goodyear et al. (2014) argued that the online interactions supported the teachers' professional learning and subsequently changed their teaching practices in the longer-term. Online communities for teachers as enabling spaces for meaningful professional discussions are also highlighted in Duncan-Howell's (2010) survey involving 98 teachers that were members of three different online communities. The results suggest that participation in online communities was motivated by a search for practical classroom strategies.

A more critical stance towards the seemingly supportive practices that social media enables is taken by Booth (2012). Booth (2012) examined how K-12 teachers' collegial practices were established in online learning communities. Booth (2012) argues that to produce a successful space for professional development online, knowledge sharing and trust must be actively fostered and sustained. The study was conducted through interviews with moderators and members while analysing community documentation with the frame of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The findings in Booth's study imply that one key aspect necessary for creating spaces for teacher professional development is "structured conversations", defined as interactions "that begin with an overarching question or issue of focus" (p.19).

A similar point of departure is taken by Ranieri, Manca, and Fini (2012) who use the concept of Community of Practice (CoP) to understand the group dynamic in five Italian Facebook groups for teachers. The findings show that the teachers' possibilities to share ideas and make their own initiatives visible were important for their participation. Ranieri et al. (2012) argue that in certain cases "networks of practice" (NoPs) are a more suitable theoretical concept when examining online professional groups where members are not in control of who is allowed to join and groups that are loosely coordinated.

A large part of the research on teachers' online participation in professional discussion forums has been based on methods such as interviews and surveys (e.g., Duncan-Howell, 2010; Petty et al., 2015). When online discussions have been studied it is primarily as a source to illustrate conclusions based on interviews or surveys (e.g., Booth, 2012). Thus, the research field is largely informed by teachers' perceptions of participating in social media discussions. Few studies have used computational data methods or analysed online discussions more systematically (Macià & García, 2016). The current study responds to this knowledge gap by working with a corpus of more than 26,000 posts and nearly 14,000 comments over a three-year period, involving multiple methodological steps in the selection procedure to find relevant threads for in-depth analysis of the online interaction.

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