



Twitter as an informal learning space for teachers!? The role of social capital in Twitter conversations among teachers



Martin Rehm ^{a,*}, Ad Notten ^b

^a University Duisburg–Essen, Universitätsstr. 2 (Building S06), 45141 Essen, Germany

^b UNU-MERIT, Maastricht University, Boschstraat 24, 6211 AX Maastricht, The Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- Conversations on Twitter contribute to individual teachers' formation of structural social capital.
- Some individuals are able to attain central positions within Twitter conversation and sustain their position over time.
- Some individuals act as intermediaries between otherwise disconnected individuals.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 November 2015

Received in revised form

15 August 2016

Accepted 19 August 2016

Available online 1 September 2016

Keywords:

Informal learning

Teacher professional development

Social capital

Social network analysis

Social media

ABSTRACT

Twitter can contribute to the continuous professional development of teachers by initiating and fostering informal learning. Social capital theory can aid to analyze the underlying communication processes and outcomes. Yet, previous research has largely neglected teachers and the role of social capital on Twitter. The present study addresses this shortcoming by analysing a hashtag conversation among German speaking teachers. Using social network analysis, we are able to show the relevance of the structural dimension of social capital in Twitter conversations among teachers.

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1. Informal learning and social media

There is an increasing need for teachers to develop and implement new, collaborative, approaches to learning (Finsterwald, Wagner, Schober, Lüftenegger, & Spiel, 2013). In order to achieve this goal, educational professionals must continuously update and expand their knowledge and skills to meet the challenges of today's world (Chalmers & Keown, 2006). According to Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, and Baumert (2011), this is type of professional development cannot be achieved through short-term interventions. Instead, a more long-term process needs to be initiated, which expands beyond the confines of formal teacher education and extends into the everyday working environments of teachers. Similarly, Fox and Wilson (2015) established that teachers

should not rely solely on formal support roles and institutions. Instead, they should rather draw on formal and informal learning networks, wherein they can share their ideas and collaboratively reflect on their practice. Here, we follow the definitions of Richter et al. (2011) and define formal (e.g. traditional) learning as “structured learning environments with a specified curriculum” (p. 117), and informal learning as “not follow[ing] a specified curriculum and [...] not [being] restricted to certain environments” (p. 117).

Contrasting these two types of learning, Hofman and Dijkstra (2010) conclude that in light of “the failure of most professional development efforts” (p. 1031), informal learning networks can contribute to capacity building of teachers by providing a platform to engage into a collaborative exchange of insights and experiences. Moreover, Conlon (2004) suggested that about 90 percent of professional development actually takes place in an informal setting, rather than in a formal one. An empirical study by Boyle, Lamprianou, and Boyle (2005) showed that these considerations are in line with the perceptions of teachers themselves. More

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: martin.rehm@uni-due.de (M. Rehm), notten@merit.unu.edu (A. Notten).

specifically, in their study among secondary schools across England, they discovered that sharing practice is perceived as an important element for longer-term professional development activities. Even more so, Hattie (2013) found that these types of teacher-driven activities tend to be more effective than top-down interventions that are part of a larger and more formal professional development initiative. Hofman and Dijkstra (2010) attributed this observation to the “one-size-fits-all set of solutions” (p. 1031), which is generally prescribed by experts from outside the regular school context (e.g. ministries, universities). These solutions fail to account for individual differences in experience, teaching style, as well as differences in the larger, classroom-type circumstances. Furthermore, rather than “relying on one-shot workshops to enhance skills” (Butler & Schnellert, 2012, p. 1207), informal learning networks provide teachers with an opportunity to continuously share and update their practice and engage into collaborative informal professional learning (Hopkins, 2000). Kukulska-Hulme and Pettit (2008) have referred to such networks also as *semi-formal learning communities*, which are bottom-up initiatives that provide spaces wherein individuals are willing to invest their time to help colleagues they would normally not have the chance to meet and work with in person (e.g. from different school districts). This offers greater flexibility than traditional teaching and learning scenarios (e.g. Choi & Jacobs, 2011; Froehlich, Beausaert, Segers, & Gerken, 2014; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Consequently, informal learning can serve, not only as a building block for the individuals' professional development, but also as a contribution to the success of the larger context (e.g. Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijjs, 2009).

Regarding informal learning, Eraut (2004) distinguishes between three different types, namely *implicit*, *reactive* and *deliberative learning*. Implicit learning takes places always and everywhere while the individual is not aware of the actual learning process. For example, snooker players know a great deal about angles and rotations, arguably without knowing the underlying physical principles. In the context of reactive learning, the individual is aware of the learning process. However, these incidences happen spontaneously in a specific context, and while executing a particular action. For example, trade representatives learn a lot about applying different sales strategies, while being in direct contact with their clients. Deliberative learning differs from the other two types of informal learning in that an individual is explicitly aware of the learning process. Here, employees deliberately take time to think about how and where they can gather new information and insights, thereby initiating their own continuous professional development. A prime example for this type of informal learning is a conference. Such an event provides a ready-made space to share information with colleagues and acquire new insights, thus promoting an informal learning process.

The rise of social media has led to a panoply of online communication spaces or sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, wherein individuals can engage into the latter type of activities and therefore engage into deliberative learning. On the basis of their structure and general characteristics, these platforms connect individuals via networked devices, such as computers (Wellman, 2001). Consequently, these platforms are also referred to as *social networking sites* (SNS). Apart from recreational purposes (e.g. sharing holiday photos and pet videos), these spaces are increasingly used as places for professionals to meet and discuss current topics and problems relevant to their profession. Additionally, there has been a growing amount of research that investigated the potential of SNS for informal learning. Owen, Fox, and Bird (2016) postulate that social media provides teachers with a means to “scale-up their professional learning” (p. 2). Moreover, a growing number of studies have shown that teachers use SNS, such as Twitter, to keep up-to-date with the latest news on education

and share resources with colleagues (Risser, 2013). This observation is paired with more theoretical considerations by scholars like (Marotzki, 2004), who suggest that social media provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to exchange information and experiences, while connecting with other people and learning from and with each other. These platforms essentially provide informal learning spaces that can initiate professional development processes (Spanhel, 2010). However, in contrast to formal learning spaces, the focus here is not primarily on the acquisition and transfer of knowledge. Instead, it is rather a question of the “contextualization, flexibility, decentralization, pluralization of knowledge and experience patterns, or [...] the opening of indeterminacy spaces” (Marotzki & Jörissen, 2008, p. 100). In that sense, there is considerable similarity with the conceptualizations of other scholars, who theorized and contemplated about online (learning) spaces. For example, Gee (2005) used the term *affinity spaces* (p. 223). He introduced this term as a result of his disagreement with concepts like “community”, which in his opinion focused too much on membership. According to the author this carries the connotation of “close-knit personal ties among people which do not necessarily always fit [the situation]” (p. 214). However, his work is largely rooted in observations from and around real-time strategy computer games. Consequently, it can be argued that affinity spaces only have limited relevance for situations where individuals engage into deliberative professional learning. Alternatively, Howard Rheingold (2007) has promoted the term *smart mobs*. Yet, while there are again conceptual similarities, Rheingold's work has mainly been used in conjunction with topics like political engagement (Hart & Sharma, 2004) and smart (technical) systems (Lee et al., 2006). Ito et al. (2013) refer to *connected learning*, which is fostered in a (online) space and “[...] seeks to build communities and collective capacities for learning and opportunity” (p. 8). Consequently, learning spaces can therefore be described as being embedded in the immediate environments of individuals and enable them to explicate their own ideas and experiences, which in turn contributes to a growing pool of resources and information that everyone can benefit from (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In the context of social media, it has been argued that a possible advantage of such online learning spaces is that they can create “persistent, predictable, multi-user connections that support a wide range of user interaction and collaborative activity.” (Mynatt, O'Day, Adler, & Ito, 1998, p. 124). Additionally, some authors have suggested that they constitute a combination of personal learning spaces that are socially connected and provide a collaborative foundation for informal learning (McPherson, Budge, & Lemon, 2015). However, when you enter such spaces, neither learning nor knowledge creation are guaranteed. Instead, they provide an opportunity for informal, professional development by enabling individuals to engage into discussions with a wide variety of other individuals (Tynjälä, 2012) and by stimulating them to critically reflect on their actions (D. A. Kolb, 1983). We therefore argue that social networking sites constitute *social opportunity spaces*, which provide the meta-context wherein knowledge creation is fostered and learning processes are stimulated by the complex interplay of various underlying relations and factors (Spanhel, 2010). Akkerman and Bakker (2011) have termed this possibility “boundary crossing” (p. 133), in order to describe a situation where individuals are enabled to expand their horizon and looking outside of their “narrow daily existence” (Williams, 2006, p. 600). Lohman (2005) calls this process as “environmental scanning” (p. 505). Yet, while such behavior could be beneficial, Hew and Hara (2007) have highlighted that “people typically value and protect what they know” (p. 1). Similarly, researchers have stipulated that individuals' worry about jeopardizing their position within their networks (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). By sharing information via SNS, the

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