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Teacher peer support in social network sites

Nick Kelly [a, b, *], Amy Antonio [a]

[a] Australian Digital Futures Institute, University of Southern Queensland, Australia
[b] Queensland University of Technology, Australia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Presents a study of teachers' peer support within open groups in social network sites.
- Teachers in large, open Facebook groups offer predominantly pragmatic advice and social support.
- Teachers in these groups are not reflecting on practice, giving feedback or modelling practice.
- Results are found to be repeatable in other Facebook groups of teachers.

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the types of support that teachers are accessing through the Social Network Site (SNS) 'Facebook'. It describes six ways in which teachers support one another within online groups. It presents evidence from a study of a large, open group of teachers online over a twelve week period, repeated with multiple groups a year later over a one week period. The findings suggest that large open groups in SNSs can be a useful source of pragmatic advice for teachers but that these groups are rarely a place for reflection on or feedback about teaching practice.

1. Introduction

Teachers learn from one another in many ways, from the formality of structured mentoring through to casual conversations in the hallway (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). In recent decades the Internet has extended the circumstances in which this collegial contact can occur, opening up a range of avenues for support and development (Dede, 2006). Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in particular have emerged as a significant way in which teachers access support online. Teachers can be observed supporting one another in commercial SNSs (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn and EdModo) as well as on private sites offered to teachers by government education departments and universities (e.g. Scootle Community in Australia and eTwinning in Europe). It is now common for teachers to be members of many different SNSs and members of many different *groups* (cliques with clear bounds within the environment) within each SNS. The support that teachers receive from their fellow professionals is known to be a significant contributor to job satisfaction, professional development and teacher retention (DeAngelis, Wall, & Che, 2013; Edwards, 2011; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006). It follows that if teachers are receiving support through SNSs then it is of great interest to understand the interactions occurring within these groups.

This paper is concerned with the question: How do teachers access support within large open groups within SNSs? SNSs are defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

* Corresponding author. Australian Digital Futures Institute, University of Southern Queensland, Springfield, Australia.
E-mail addresses: nick.kelly@usq.edu.au (N. Kelly), amy.antonio@usq.edu.au (A. Antonio).

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Anecdotally, many teachers are using SNSs to receive support. While there is evidence in the literature of online communities for teacher support (Lin, Lin, & Huang, 2008; Matzat, 2013; Yeh, 2010), there is limited empirical evidence about the kinds of support that teachers are finding within these communities and SNSs in particular. Such evidence would be valuable in that it can potentially advise teacher education, policy and design of SNSs for teachers. In addressing the question of support in SNSs we focus on the platform *Facebook*, due to its popularity within English-speaking nations and its widespread use by teachers (Junco, 2013).

The question is addressed by distinguishing types of online teacher support and then studying open groups in SNSs to observe the presence of this support. The framework of House (1981) is used to describe the different forms of *social support* that teachers find within online communities, based on existing research. This foundation forms the basis for establishing categories that are particular to *online teacher support* following the work of Clarke et al. (2014).

The paper uses these categories of online teacher support to conduct a two-phase study of teachers finding support within Facebook groups. In the first phase, a large, open group within Facebook is studied to determine the support present in interactions between teachers over a 12-week period. In the second phase, these results are tested for repeatability by conducting a study of an additional five groups over a one-week period. The results suggest that teachers are using open groups in SNSs to find collegial and pragmatic support online but that they are rarely engaging in discussion relating to teaching practice. When teachers request any kind of support in large open groups it is typically forthcoming; however, they appear to be reticent to ask, which has implications for teacher education, particularly training around *relational agency* (Edwards, 2005) in online environments – learning how to draw on other teachers as a resource.

2. Background

2.1. Distinguishing ways that teachers support one another online

Having the support of others within their profession is critical for a teacher's development. This is especially true for pre-service and early career teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Long et al., 2012; McCormack et al., 2006), but continues to be important as teachers progress in the profession. Learning through open groups in SNSs constitutes a form of informal support, where there is no specified curriculum or structure (Grant & Zeichner, 1981; Richter et al., 2011).

2.1.1. General forms of social support

Teachers helping one another online is a form of *social support*, where social relationships lead to positive outcomes for individuals within the professional realm (Cobb, 1976; House, 1981). Teacher social support can be summarised as interpersonal relations with elements of "affect, aid and affirmation" (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) and problematized as the question of "*who* gives *what* to *whom* regarding *which* problems?" (House, 1981; emphasis in original). Types of social support can be distinguished as (after House, 1981):

- **Emotional support** in the form of esteem, affect, trust, concern and listening;
- **Appraisal support** in the form of affirmation, feedback and social comparison;
- **Informational support** in the form of advice, suggestion, directives and information; and
- **Instrumental support** in the form of aid in kind, money, labour and time.

These four forms of social support provide a framework for studying the positive professional outcomes from peer relationships between teachers, and many studies discuss these kinds of support. A study by Greenglass, Fiksenbaum, and Burke (1996) looked explicitly at the impacts of emotional, informational and instrumental support on Canadian teachers' emotional exhaustion (N = 833). They found that of three types of supportive relationship (co-workers, supervisor, friends and family), co-workers were the most important buffer of emotional exhaustion. Informational support was another buffer of emotional exhaustion, whether it came from a supervisor or a co-worker. Instrumental support in general can help a teacher feel that they have a greater sense of control over their work situation. Whether these findings apply to online social support has not yet been confirmed in the literature. A mixed methods study of twelve first year beginning teachers in the USA interacting in an online network revealed that "an online support community is an effective means of providing social, emotional, practical, and professional support to beginning teachers" (DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003). In particular, the study suggests that peer-to-peer online support can alleviate isolation and loneliness in the profession (through emotional support), and that online forums can facilitate joint reflection on practice.

A study of secondary teachers in the UK (N = 628) found that burnout and job dissatisfaction were reduced by emotional support from peers (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011). An exploratory study of secondary teachers in Hong Kong (N = 75) looked at the support provided by online forums. Their findings showed that teachers find emotional support in these online spaces, and suggest that anonymity within the community enabled participants to feel comfortable in requesting support (Leung, Chiang, Chui, Lee, & Mak, 2011). Paulus and Scherff (2008) conducted a qualitative case study (N = 15) of pre-service teachers using computer-mediated communication (an online forum) to access support during their practical experience. They found that, in addition to providing a space for structured reflection, there was emotional support to be found, and "knowing that someone is there to listen to their concerns may help [teachers to get through their first year]" (Paulus & Scherff, 2008).

Finally, there is evidence that formal mentoring relationships can, when mentors are well prepared, provide all aspects of social support (Barrera, Braley, & Slate, 2010; Clark & Byrnes, 2012; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). In a review of the literature on mentoring, Hobson et al. (2009) found evidence that mentees receive emotional and psychological support, increasing confidence, morale and job satisfaction. However, these benefits are only realised where the mentoring is "fit for purpose and addresses, and is responsive to, the needs of the mentee/learner" (Hobson et al., 2009, p. 212), i.e. where the conditions for effective mentoring are met.

These studies provide evidence of the four types of social support that teachers provide for one another. They demonstrate that collegial support, either through formal relationships (e.g. mentor-mentee) or informal relationships (e.g. in the staff room, in online forums), is currently occurring in both the real world and online.

2.1.2. Forms of teacher online social support

Based on the description of various roles for co-operating teachers provided by Clarke et al. (2014), we propose that a more fine-grained (six categories in place of the aforementioned four) typology of online teacher support is appropriate for studying online communities of teachers (Table 1). In a comprehensive literature review, Clarke et al. (2014) identify eleven roles that co-operating teachers—those who supervise and support student teachers during practical experience—take on to support pre-service teachers. Of these eleven roles only six apply to the