



Review

Informal online communities and networks as a source of teacher professional development: A review



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A variety of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches have been used.
- The communities and networks studied present a wide range of features.
- Several social factors affect members' engagement and the evolution of participation.
- Informal online communities and networks are a valued source of professional development.

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ABSTRACT

Informal online communities and networks offer teachers the possibility of voluntarily engaging in shared learning, reflecting about teaching practice and receiving emotional support. Bottom-up online communities and networks are an important source of professional development, although research around these social learning structures mainly consists in describing particular cases using a wide diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches. This review analyses the existing theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, the main characteristics and practices of online communities and networks, as well as their principal repercussions in teacher professional development. A critical analysis of the emergent themes in the revised articles sheds light on eligible perspectives for further research.

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1. Introduction

Most teachers participate in formal professional development activities such as courses, seminars and master programs, among others. Although courses are the most popular formula, teachers who undertake professional development activities that involve individual and collective research, peer observation and participation in professional networks tend to implement active teaching practices involving projects, group work and the use of new technologies (OECD, 2014). Indeed, studies have found that professionals spend several hours per week informally learning with peers about work-related topics (Campana, 2014; de Laat & Schreurs, 2013; Eraut, 2011; Smaller, 2005) and teacher professional development through collaboration among equals has been shown to be a key factor for student achievement (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007).

It is not uncommon for teachers in search of new ideas or willing to try new methodologies to look for collaboration opportunities and support outside the school. Online networks and communities offer these teachers the opportunity to share knowledge and learn with other peers who are located far away from each other (Ravenscroft, Schmidt, Cook, & Bradley, 2012). Nowadays, learning has become open and participative through the use of social media and portable devices. Participation in blogs, wikis, shared lists of resources and social networking sites has become part of the daily life of many teachers (Haythornthwaite, 2009). Technological devices allow access to collective intelligence and enable the creation and sharing of knowledge between teachers (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Thereby, teachers have the possibility of being active and self-directed learners who decide what to learn depending on their needs (Merriam, 2001) and are able to connect with other people who can help them to solve particular problems (Lieberman & Mace, 2010).

1.1. Professional development through informal learning

Teacher professional development can be classified according to three models (Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996): the “craft” model states that teachers’ professional development is a result of experience acquired from classroom experiences; the “expert” model asserts that teacher professional development is the result of training by other expert teachers; finally, the “interactive” model states that teachers’ knowledge grows when external sources of information lead to new experiences in the classroom which, depending on the results, can lead to new insights, thus facilitating professional development. The first and the second models are

incomplete, as the “craft” model does not explain how new knowledge is incorporated into teacher practice, and the “expert” model views teachers in a passive role and therefore not responsible for their own training. The interactive model is the most complete and takes into account several domains of the teaching situation (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002): i) the personal domain including teachers’ ideas, knowledge and beliefs; ii) the external domain represented by information or resources that teachers acquire while collaborating with other teachers or participating in training activities; iii) the domain of practice related to action research activities developed in the classroom context; iv) and, the domain of consequence that includes students’ results and other consequences in the classroom climate or organization. According to the interactive model, an external source of information, which could be the consequence of participation in a network or community, can generate change in the teachers’ knowledge and foster new practices in their teaching. After experimenting in the classroom, the teacher can evaluate the processes applied and the student outcomes and, based on the results of this evaluation, make changes at a cognitive and behavioural level.

The professional development that occurs in the interactive model can be considered as informal learning. Informal learning is a controversial term that has many definitions and also a great number of related concepts, such as implicit learning, non-formal learning, situated learning, self-directed learning or tacit knowledge, among others (Drotner, 2008). In this review, we will consider this term as “learning from experience that takes place outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored, class-room based activities” (Watkins & Marsick, 1992, p. 288). This kind of knowledge can represent more than seventy percent of the knowledge acquired at work, though in most cases it is overlooked because it is tacit or difficult to explain (Eraut, 2011). Everyday participation in social settings is a great source of informal learning, especially for novice workers (Lave & Wenger, 1991) who can benefit from support and feedback from peers to increase their “confidence, learning, retention and commitment, especially during their first few months when they are best provided by the person on the spot” (Eraut, 2011, p.9).

1.2. Social learning structures

Social learning structures can be classified as communities or networks, which can coexist in the same group, although their characteristics and their impact on the learning processes might be different.

According to Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat (2011) a network is defined as “the set of relationships, personal interactions, and

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