

Describing and Categorising Online Professional Development for Teachers

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Abstract: The professional development of teachers is an important and necessary process in successful school teaching and learning. While there are varied approaches to professional development there is a widespread view that many have been problematic. The internet is recognised as having the potential to provide more effective professional development outcomes. This paper describes a framework for describing professional development websites and provides a classification of professional development websites based on community participation and problem ownership.

The professional development of teachers is recognised as a necessary process in the long-term development of 'full-fledged professionals' (Schoenfeld, 2002, p.22). This is particularly apposite for beginning teachers. In particular, the first two years of teaching have long been recognised as critical stages for survival and adjustment to the profession (Katz, 1972). Without support, neophyte teachers can find it difficult to adapt to change, and can readily abandon approaches to teaching and learning emphasised in current curriculum initiatives (Schoenfeld, 2002).

In some countries, such as Australia, novice teachers may be sent to remote and unfamiliar locations where their traditional support structures are no longer available (Herrington & Herrington, 2001). In others, such as the USA, employment conditions may attract new teachers to move far from home. They become cut off from the institutions that provided their training, and are left to deal with profession challenges with little support or encouragement. Consequently, in the USA, teaching as an occupation loses many of its newly trained members very early in their career. After three years, 29% of all beginning teachers have left teaching and after five years, 39% have left teaching altogether (Ingersoll, 2001). Some of the major reasons for this exodus are the lack of administrative and professional support.

While professional support and development is critical for new teachers, all teachers can experience the detrimental effects of professional isolation. Elliot Eisner, the emeritus professor of education at Stanford University, views professional isolation as the major problem facing schools:

The deeper problems of schooling have to do with teacher isolation and the fact that teachers don't often have access to other people who know what they're doing when they teach, and who can help them do it better. (Eisner, 2001)

Professional development has the potential to assist and alleviate the problems facing teachers, although success appears to depend both on the content and approach. Feiman-Nemser (2001) suggests that traditional forms of professional development such as mentoring, one-off workshops, conferences and summer institutes do not provide a cohesive and planned approach, and are problematic in achieving desired outcomes. Additionally, the content of many programs reflects the concerns of outside presenters rather than allowing ownership of the issues faced by teachers in various stages of development. Instead, Feiman-Nemser argues that

Professional development takes place through serious, ongoing conversation. The conversation occurs in communities of practice. It focuses on the particulars of teaching, learning, subject matter, and students. By engaging in professional discourse with like-minded colleagues grounded in the content of and tasks of teaching and learning, teachers can deepen knowledge of subject matter and curriculum, refine their instructional repertoire, hone their inquiry skills, and become critical colleagues. (Feiman-Nemser, 2001)

Examples of successful communities of practice exist in many face-to-face forms and recent literature suggests that the internet can provide specific opportunities for the growth of communities. Building learning communities on the internet requires participants and stakeholders to be contributors to the site and not simply consumers (Hunter, 2002). Evidence for a community can be found in the exchange of ideas in such things as chat rooms and discussion boards. Archived discussions provide wide-ranging and durable discussions allowing participants to interact, revise and reflect upon ideas over sustained period of time.

Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000) in their summary of research into school teaching and learning noted that professional development is often done in isolation, however, they point to the potential offered by the internet stating that: 'Opportunities for continued contact and support as teachers incorporate new ideas into their teaching are limited, yet the rapid spread of Internet access provides a ready means of maintaining such contact if appropriately designed tools and services are available' (p. 27).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the current online approaches that are being used for the professional development of teachers and suggest a taxonomy, based on community involvement and ownership, that can both categorise different sites and suggest further research for the design and development of future initiatives in this area.

Characteristics of Professional Development Websites

Using internet search engines with descriptors that included 'professional development'; 'online'; and 'teacher' a range of approximately 20 web sites that focused on teacher professional development were identified and analysed. The following descriptive characteristics were in evidence to varying degrees in these sites:

Knowledge building opportunities exist with online classes and workshops available as group classes and self-directed modules. Some provide accreditation towards university courses. Other forms of professional learning include online conferences, group classes and or workshops, teacher case studies, and digital videos of teaching episodes. Some sites also provide telementoring with online advice and assistance with teaching while others offer assessment and self-assessment of learning outcomes.

Communication Tools and Resources such as synchronous chat rooms, asynchronous discussion boards, Listservs, email lists, help and frequently asked questions (FAQs). These tools are organised in a variety of ways that enable discussions to be topic-based, expert-led or participant-driven. Archived discussions are also available at some sites.

Information sharing is often provided in the form of journals, publications, reports, newsletters, announcements, notice boards, what's new and calendars of events.

Instructional resources that teachers can use in their classrooms include lesson plans, student activities, and software.

Tools such as web tours, site maps and search engines that search databases for professional development opportunities. Some sites are customisable enabling participants to develop metacognitive resources in planning, monitoring and evaluating their own professional development as in the creation of online journals, portfolios and planners. Some sites provide the facilities for participants to input information and resources.

Links to other sites such as professional associations, publications, collaborative projects, standards, policies, and resources.

Design generally varies between traditional text-based layouts to metaphorical interfaces such as a teacher's classroom or a virtual campus. Membership and fees are a requirement of some sites.

Management of the site can be through private ownership such as media companies and publishers, or public ownership for example universities and education departments. Some sites employ staff through grant funding.

Scope of the site reflects local, national and international concerns and participation, and the degree to which it addresses different learning areas, teaching levels and career stages.

Community Building reflects the degree to which the site fosters mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise between participants (Wenger, 1998). This forms the basis of the classification system described below.

Categories of Teacher Professional Development Websites

There are a number of dimensions that can be used to classify sites. In respect of the introductory remarks, it would seem appropriate to base any classification scheme on the capability of the site to offer professional development and communities of practice that address the concerns of teachers. Using these criteria, four different groups were identified:

1. *Structured Communities* such as university masters and graduate certificate courses provide information, tasks and environments for professional development. Typically, however, this type of approach reflects the concerns of the course developers and often addresses issues relevant to teachers in their later stages of career development, for example, educational leadership. These courses also tend to be structured to meet the timetabling requirements of the institution rather than the lifestyle demands of learners.
2. *Semi-structured Communities* occur at sites that enable users to choose professional development on issues that may concern them. These sites, however, are limited in choice and may not address everyone's concerns. For example, Indiana University's *Learning to Teach with Technology Studio* at <http://www.ltts.org> offers modularised, accredited professional development for teachers wishing to integrate technology into their teaching.
3. *Informal Communities* are environments on the internet that enable groups of like-minded professionals to communicate and interact on issues of their concern. For example, *Tapped In* at <http://www.tappedin.org/> offers 'events' such as real time presentations and discussion groups that facilitate various forms of community participation.
4. *Resource banks* are sites that provide a wealth of resources often in the form of links to other sites on the internet. Classifications based on content disciplines, grade levels and different issues, such as assessment, enable teachers to access information that address their particular and immediate concerns. These sites are especially useful for consumers of information but do not provide a basis for community development and support. A typical example of such a site is the one offered by the Eisenhower foundation at <http://www.enc.org/professional/>

Conclusion

The internet offers a variety of approaches for the professional development of teachers. Sites can generally be classified into four approaches that reflect the nature of community building and problem ownership. They

typically offer a plethora of information, resources, links to an even greater numbers of resources and different ways in which participants can communicate, consume and contribute. It is questionable, however, how successful each of these categories are in developing professionals with different needs and at different stages of their careers. For example, it could be hypothesised that teachers early in their career development and with urgent learning needs may be more inclined to access resource banks rather than structured university courses. Further research that examines the effectiveness of each of these categories for varying groups and needs of teachers may provide useful guidelines for the future design of online professional development.

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