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Teachers' fleeting encounters in online professional development communities blended with strong school communities of practice

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Background to the topic

The intersections between virtual and physical communities provide an important but largely unfamiliar, undefined and overlooked context in which to examine teachers' professional learning. Recent work in this field, for example Finlay (2008) and Slaouti (2007), signals the need to better understand the ways teachers blend formal online study with the situated learning which occurs within everyday participation in communities of practice. As Laferriere, Lamon and Chan (2006) state "despite much enthusiasm given to the use of technology in education, the potential of e-learning in transforming teacher learning is neither sufficiently explored nor well understood." Research focusing on the intersections between work and study, and particularly the role of online learning for professional development, represents an area of growing interest. This is true not only in teacher education but in the wider field of professional learning, development and support (Stacey & Gerbic, 2009; Maor & Volet, 2007).

This study examines teacher learning supported by elective study in a graduate diploma in information and communication technology programme offered by a New Zealand university. Participants were predominantly studying part-time while working in schools.

Research questions/focus of the enquiry

The purpose of the research was to understand the role of online professional development in fostering teachers' constructions of knowledge and understanding, and to explore the intersecting boundaries between online learning communities and teachers' practice within their school communities. In addition to exploring the situated and social nature of teachers' learning, the study aimed to identify the processes, activities, elements and attributes which enable and impede transfer between communities impacting on teacher's practice. In an endeavour to contribute to the development of online pedagogies to support teacher professional development the main research question asked "How can qualification-bearing online professional development best support teachers' learning and practice within their professional communities of practice?"

Research methods and/or mapping of the literature

An holistic case study with embedded sub-cases (Yin, 2006) enabled in-depth scrutiny of situated processes, inter-relationships and individual perspectives in order to represent the multiple realities which encapsulated teachers' experiences. The holistic case study spanned the experiences of 15 teachers across 65 course enrolments and focused on their professional learning via the online courses as well as the relevance and connections to their everyday work. Data analysis included examination of online course design, online participation records, and teachers' online postings and activities; as well as 30 interviews with the case study teachers and 11 interviews with the workplace colleagues of 4 teachers. The case design, data collection and analysis drew on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice as an organising framework. This paper will focus on the experiences of 8 of the 15 teachers, presenting their perspectives of participation in the online community.

Analytical and/or theoretical frame

Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning, conceptualised around communities of practice, recognises that individuals are members of multiple communities. The experience of multi-membership opens learning possibilities which transcend the boundaries of communities and creates a new role of 'boundary-spanner'. The boundary-spanner is likely to experience complexity as they negotiate learning experiences between communities. This provides a useful theoretical tool to examine teachers' learning between virtual and real communities and to reconceptualise these activities in relation to the literature on blended learning.

Research findings and/or contribution to knowledge

This paper highlights the value of fleeting encounters gained through peripheral engagement in online learning communities. Teachers' participation varied considerably within and across courses. Although teachers did not form close bonds and were ambivalent about belonging to the online course communities, they nevertheless acknowledged the value of interactions with other teachers in their programme who helped to create dissonance and challenge existing beliefs about teaching and learning. Teachers were also pragmatic and purposeful about their study ensuring that professional learning translated into practical benefits. Teachers blended ideas, resources and strategies from the online course with their experiences in the classroom and situated their learning in practical terms within their school communities.

This research contributes to a greater understanding of the socio-cultural processes involved in teachers' professional learning, and the situated locales of teachers' learning in relation to online professional development. From a theoretical perspective the research contributes further insight to the community of practice social theory of learning especially relating to the intersections and connections between communities and the nature of boundaries and multi-membership of communities including virtual communities. From a practical perspective, the research contributes to the field of professional development by identifying opportunities to enhance the congruence between formal postgraduate qualifications and meaningful learning experiences for teachers. An unexpected contribution of this research is the opportunity to reconceptualise blended learning from the perspective of teachers who orchestrate the elements of their experiences across virtual and real contexts, using their dual membership of communities to draw together theory and practice influencing their daily work and communities of practice.

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