Chapter 20
Teachers' Use of Social Networking Sites for Continuing Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of the results of a study conducted amongst secondary school teachers of English in Malta, this chapter explores the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) for professional development purposes. In the digital era, SNS provide teachers with the opportunity of creating a Personal Learning Network (PLN), which is an increasingly significant way of acquiring new knowledge and enhancing pedagogical skills while also having the capacity of making teachers feel they belong to a Community of Practice (CoP). This chapter shows how despite their regular use of SNS for personal reasons, teachers do not always exploit these sites to achieve professional development. It is argued that training is a necessary means of not only enabling teachers to learn how to use such tools for such a purpose but also of redefining the way they think about the process of acquiring and sharing knowledge and skills in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). As examples of social media, SNS are characterized by a high level of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a medium level of social presence and media richness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Knowing how to exploit these features for professional development is one of the hallmarks of the connected teacher. As Buzzetto-More (2012) points out,

Today's change agents are individuals who are able to successfully amass large numbers of 'friends' or 'followers' in social networking systems and

who have a particular talent for launching and promoting new sub-networks by fostering intro-ductions and connections between people (p. 8).

Despite the criticism of those who see such networks as being "socially ineffective" and who claim that "the social media wave has crested" (Yiannopoulos as cited in McGuinness, 2012, p. 13), SNS play a pivotal role in education and are bound to continue shaping the practices of teachers for the foreseeable future.

This chapter aims to demonstrate that teachers' ability to harness the potential of SNS for professional development purposes is crucial. Knowing how to create a PLN is a twenty-first century skill that can be developed by means of appropriate training that targets not only teachers' competences but also their attitude towards the contribution that SNS can make to their Continuing Professional Development (CPD). By means of the results of a small-scale study involving a group of teachers who participated in a training workshop on the use of social media, this chapter seeks to show that teachers can be encouraged to understand that the tools they use routinely for personal reasons also have latent qualities that make them ideal for achieving professional growth.

BACKGROUND

The effects of social media on a number of domains seem to be quite prominent and education has perhaps been one of the most highly affected. In fact, Clark (2012) argues that changes in human communication have an immediate impact on educators. He identifies three phases of the impact of social media on education that while "running in parallel" (Clark, 2012) commenced sequentially. The first phase is when educators "started to use the potential of social media to support each other and for their personal and professional development" (Clark, 2012). Phase two is when educators started using social media to develop educational

material for students while phase three is when students began to develop similar material for themselves and their teachers. The target audience for the educational content developed in phase one is comprised of educators and SNS play a crucial role in allowing the originators of such content (fellow educators) to share it online. The teachers who engage in such sharing appear to be driven by a common goal and "Communication is… intended to be into and within the community of educators" (Clark, 2012). Given the advantages derived by educators who use social media for professional development purposes, Clark (2012) suggests that all teachers "should be provided with support and encouragement to use social media as part of their professional development, and to use social media tools to improve communication and sharing of knowledge." Appropriate training in the use of SNS for professional development allows teachers to wield the connections forming part of their PLN for the purpose of sharing knowledge and developing a sense of community with other educators. This chapter deals primarily with the role of SNS in teachers' CPD, however, it is impossible to ignore the use of such sites for broader educational aims given the interdependent nature of teachers' and students' use of SNS in education.

The Educational Use of SNS

In order to understand the benefits that may be accrued through the use of SNS in education it is important to review the substantial amount of literature about the uses of SNS for educational purposes. The volume of research conducted about students' use of SNS seems to surpass that regarding teachers' use (Greenhow, 2009), however, it can be argued that similar benefits are enjoyed by both kinds of users. In addition, students' successful use of SNS in education is somewhat dependent on teachers' own ability to use such tools and most importantly their attitude in relation to them.

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