

Chapter 4

Learning Communities: Theory and Practice of Leveraging Social Media for Learning

Heather Robinson

University of North Texas, USA

Whitney Kilgore

University of North Texas, USA

Aras Bozkurt

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4520-642X>

Anadolu University, Turkey & University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to present the similarities and differences of three learning communities: communities of practice (CoPs), professional learning communities (PLCs), and professional learning networks (PLNs). For this purpose, researchers adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach and interviews with three connected educators and content area experts were conducted regarding their views, perceptions, and experiences of the various learning communities and how technology (specifically Twitter) is used as part of their learning in an open community. Additionally, the interviews helped explain the current practices in community development and support, the evolution from a lurker to a contributor to a community leader, and the evolution from a community to a network.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, considerable attention has been dedicated to the topic of informal learning in communities. There is a significant amount of literature associated with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Communities of Practice (CoPs). As ubiquitous technologies have afforded new methods for informal learning to occur, they have been accompanied by the rise of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) by the end of the 20th century and beginning of 21st century (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003; Siemens, 2005; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Generally, individuals develop such communities, groups, and networks with a shared endeavor or interest (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). In this context, individuals belong to one or more communities through work, schools, home and/or hobbies, and members of these communities may be more active and hold different roles in each (Wenger et al., 2002).

A successful online learning network or community for educators increases communication, collaboration, and support among participants (Booth, 2011; Yen et al., 2019). Accordingly, “these communities enable educators to gain equitable access to human and information resources that may not be available locally” (Booth, 2011, p. 1). Community members often feel comfortable freely sharing ideas that contribute to learning and new knowledge development. By leveraging the affordances of open digital ubiquitous technologies, these communities are forming online via social media within Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and others. Based on above thoughts, similarities and differences of three learning communities are presented: Communities of Practice (CoPs), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). Interviews of three connected educators are also presented in order to identify themes and commonalities regarding their views, perceptions, and experiences of the various learning communities and how technology (specifically Twitter) is used as part of their learning in an open community.

This chapter further provides clear definitions of these types of learning communities (PLCs, PLNs, and CoPs). This includes descriptions of their key characteristics, practices, and underlying theory, which are also synthesized in the review of literature. The development and design of personal and professional learning networks, generally, are explored in the review of literature. Current trends and the use of social media for developing learning networks are analyzed to inform the development of interview questions. Such an approach allowed explanation of how social media was used for professional learning and to explore the differences exhibited by legitimate peripheral participants (sometimes called lurkers), core contributors, and other community leaders in such environments. The authors clarify how and why learning networks are formed, the characteristics of these networks, and the role technologies play in a learning community. Additionally, emergent themes not tied to these topics of inquiry were identified from the interviews.

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