

Chapter 7

Supporting Teacher Development through Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, social networking has emerged as a new way for groups to communicate and collaborate online. Especially popular with “digital natives” who have grown up with technology infused in all facets of their daily lives, social networking is changing the way people interact and altering traditional views of community and participation. Recent educational reform movements have advocated for teacher educators to embrace learning communities as a way to prepare and support new teachers. Considering the current student population in schools of education and their affinity for digital communication, social networking can be used to foster online learning communities where preservice teachers’ development can be supported. This chapter examines social networking and outlines recent research related to its use in the support of teacher education. The chapter concludes with design considerations for teacher educators who wish to develop social networks to foster their own online learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Quality teacher preparation programs understand that both teaching and learning are social processes that require vibrant communities in order to thrive (see, for example, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999;

Grossman et al., 2001). The definition of “community,” however, has evolved in the digital age. It is not uncommon for close friends to communicate daily on social networks such as Facebook, while only meeting infrequently in person. And it is now more common for business colleagues to network via online spaces such as LinkedIn than on the golf course. For today’s students, develop-

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ing a vibrant community of learners is enhanced by the use of social networking where students can collaborate about course content, create and share ideas, and manage group projects. Teachers in K-16 environments are increasingly exploring ways to use online social networking tools to extend learning beyond the classroom walls and to cultivate a sense of community in their students. In order to prepare teachers for teaching and learning in the digital age, schools of education also need to harness the power of social networking to complement classroom instruction and to create supportive online learning communities.

In this chapter, we discuss social networking and its prevalence as both a communication and instructional tool in 21st Century teacher education classrooms. We then examine the present state of teacher education programs and explore recent challenges to achieving the institutional vision of fostering the development of professionals who are life-long learners committed to fostering student learning using the best tools and techniques available. After defining social networking and the goals of teacher preparation, we attempt to re-envision teacher preparation as a space that builds communities of learners who continue to grow and support each other well into their professional careers with the help of social networks. Throughout the chapter, we reference contemporary research that demonstrates how social networking can be used in teacher education to foster learning communities that support teachers' growth professionally. Lastly, we conclude the chapter by outlining design considerations for teacher educators who want to include social networking as a means of supporting teacher development.

BACKGROUND

What is Social Networking?

Traditionally, the term “networking” has been used to describe massive webs of wires and machines that are connected to form some larger system of interaction. But the term has also been used in other ways. For instance, “networking” can also be used to describe a social gathering such as a cocktail party where people attend in order to casually meet other professionals in hopes of making important business connections. Social networking can be viewed as cross between these traditional images. Built upon a system of computers and Internet hubs, social networks allow users to communicate and interact in a virtual cocktail party. Users of social networking sites employ digital media (photos, videos, etc) to build online profiles that represent their personal or professional identities. This network affords them the opportunity to connect with friends and colleagues, form online relationships and have conversations with others across geographical divides. Where once the primary form of communication online was email, social networks have changed how people interact online. Whether for business or pleasure, users of social networks can instantaneously chat, post “status updates,” maintain web logs (blogs), and identify their current location through GPS coordinates on their smart phones. With these multiple forms of communication, social networks have made the Internet a much more interactive space.

To understand the influence of social networking sites, consider the following statistics: Facebook, the most popular social networking site worldwide, has surpassed Google as the site where online users spend the most time (Schroeder, 2010). Eighty six percent of 18- to 29-year-olds say they use social-networking sites and the fastest growing demographic for social networking sites are older adults where 47 percent of internet users from 50-64 said they use social media, as did

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