Chapter 25

From Basic Participation to Transformation:
Immersive Virtual Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

In a time of great change and challenge in education, teachers have an "urgency" with regard to their professional development. Many educators are choosing to move away from traditional modes to participation in online communities of practice. The aim of this research was to verify that online communities of practice can support transformative learning and positive professional development experiences for members. Two community platforms were observed and examined in terms of online activity. In addition to the formal research methods, the researchers monitored the activity of a selection of community members, tracking their engagement and participation in the communities. The research demonstrates that rich and transformative learning and professional development can occur in online communities of practice. The authors highlight some of the values and skills required by both the community and active members. They conclude that well designed and deftly supported online communities have a bright future for professional learning and development.

INTRODUCTION

The 2002 United Nations' Education for All initiative indicated:

[G]lobal research . . . has established unequivocally that….education is one of the most powerful instruments known for reducing poverty and inequality and for laying the basis for sustained economic growth, sound governance, and effective institutions (UNESCO, 2002, p. v.).

However, the education systems around the world appear to be broken (Robinson, 2008). Over the last three decades there have been a wide range of studies that have identified the deleterious effects of education (Robinson, 2001). The impact of such findings are various, with reactions ranging from denial, anger and frustration, to a willingness to embrace an alternative paradigm for both learning and teaching. It can be argued that the time is ripe for a shift away from content to a greater focus on creative and critical thinking, and lifelong learning skills. However, many education systems tend to encourage passive learners who do not question, and for whom the ultimate goal is finding (and remembering) the 'right' answer (Owen, 2013).

The approaches within education systems have a tendency to be reinforced by practitioner professional development, and as a result are reiterated by teachers. Most readers, for example, are likely to have sat in a room (physical or virtual) during a Professional Learning Development (PLD) session where a facilitator delivers a presentation about innovative practice...while the audience passively listens and is not encouraged to participate! (Owen, 2013). Traditional professional development may include some or any of the following: taking of courses for academic credit, workshops, departmental workshops, and in-house training from colleagues. This type of professional is disconnected from the main work environment and teaching and learning context.

Within New Zealand, studies conducted into innovative curriculum and teaching illustrate that innovations tend to occur in 'pockets', and that "long-term, system-wide change is extremely difficult. It requires a culture shift: a new environment in which the majority of teachers think in new ways, develop new skills and have new understandings of themselves as professionals" (Bolstead, & Gilbert, 2012, p. 43). The time and effort given to most PLD initiatives generally have not produced significant improvement in teacher performance. As such, many of the issues relating to teacher performance remained unaddressed and surfaced in national and local policy reviews year after year.

In the New Zealand educational environment there are some initiatives underway where education practitioner professional development is being re-designed (Ham & Davey, 2008). Shifts toward contextualised, personalised, self-paced learning, underpinned by the development of an online professional social identity, are challenging notions of what PLD actually comprises. This challenge means that change is not a simple process because it requires wider understandings around expectations of what PLD should be and what it should provide for learners (Stoll, 2004).

Many New Zealand educational institutions are turning to Communities of Practice (CoPs) to support professional educators growth and development. CoPs, which enable situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), are not new in education, and over the last five years, building on face-to-face CoPs, engagement in online Virtual Professional Development (VPD) has continued to grow in New Zealand education environments (Lai et al., 2006). However, it is far from certain that online CoPs form an integral part of, or provide effective opportunities for more formal professional learning and development.

Within the relevant literature there is a wide range of definitions for online CoPs, but most include notions of knowledge management, 'meaning making' (Siemens, 2008), and profes-

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