

Chapter 24

The Networked Learning Framework: A Model for Networked Professional Learning Utilizing Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the Networked Learning Framework (NLF), a networked learning model utilized in the development of a networked teacher professional development (nTPD) program. The NLF is a model which combines the use of social media tools found in common social networking sites with guided online activities to deliver innovative and engaging learning opportunities. One implementation of the NLF, the nTPD Courselet, delivered in a social networking site for Alberta teachers, is described in detail. Teachers report that the sharing of resources, reflective blogs, and collegial discussions are the most valuable outcomes of nTPD Courselets. Design principals and factors for designers of faculty PD developers to follow when using the Networked Learning Framework, as well as descriptions of two other NLF implementations, are presented in the chapter. Further research to identify effective supports for social networking novices and ways to build online facilitator capacity are needed.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND EDUCATION

There is little doubt that digital media continues to transform how people create, share and collaborate in our ever increasingly globalized world. Technology is recognized as the primary method people use to stay in contact, collaborate with oth-

ers, and increasingly to be in control of their own learning (Johnson, Smith, Levine, & Haywood, 2010). Social media technologies are becoming pervasive in work environments and digital media literacy comes to the fore as a key skill in almost every profession (New Media Consortium, 2010). As our societies transition from the Information

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Age to the Social Media Age, education is one area that struggles to make sense of that transition.

Educators are facing many challenges as social media technology becomes more prevalent. One pressing challenge for education is to identify and share ways in which social media technologies can be implemented into educational environments. Outside of the classroom, new media technologies underscore every part of student life as tools for social networking, online collaboration, and media sharing are all rapidly maturing and becoming accessible online (Hovorka & Rees, 2009). As with any transition in education practices, teacher professional development and training is key in bringing about changes that make a difference for students.

A second challenge that education systems are facing is increasing learner demands for online learning opportunities. Online enrollments continue to rise (Allen & Seaman, 2010) in both K-12 and post-secondary education and these levels still show few signs of leveling off. Despite recent questions about the quality of online learning, academic leaders report that online learning is of comparable or better quality remain than face-to-face learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Three quarters of the public school districts in the United States offer online or blended courses and it is anticipated that these online enrollments numbers will continue to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2008) for some time yet. Several reasons exist for the rising enrollments. For example, online learning opportunities allow students in rural areas or small school districts to provide learners with course choices that could not otherwise be offered (Picciano & Seaman, 2008). Flexibility is another example of a reason that online learning is becoming more and more sought. Despite this demand, administrators report that fewer than 30 percent of educators (Allen & Seaman, 2009) accept the value of online education. As enrollments increase, the need for educators who can provide quality online experiences for students will continue to be an issue.

Educators in the emerging Social Media Age are charged with the task of creating learning activities that include social media, although few have any formal training in digital technologies and social media (Whitehouse, Reynolds, & Caperton, 2009). This challenge to educators is compounded by the fact that social media technologies are emerging more quickly than they can be integrated into course material and textbooks. Even newly graduated teachers are sorely behind in their knowledge of this types of media technologies in which they are expected to be skilled practitioners. A national study of K-12 teachers found that online teachers felt that their teacher education did not prepare them adequately for teaching online (Archambault, 2011). One solution suggested was that teachers themselves need to take online courses as part of their teacher preparation.

Teacher professional development (TPD) that focuses on the integration of these new technologies into teaching practice is critical. At the same time the access to timely, ongoing, and relevant TPD opportunities to meet these kinds of needs in an effective way continues to be a challenge for administrators and educational planners. Particularly so when one-day seminars and lectures have been recognized as a rather ineffective way of providing technology TPD. Today's teachers must be adaptive experts and lifelong learners, continually seeking and developing knowledge and skills, rather than working to acquire a core set of skills to be used for an entire career (Whitehouse, Reynolds, & Caperton, 2009). Online teacher professional development (oTPD) has been identified as one type of TPD that is capable of fulfilling these needs in this emerging Social Media Age (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009; Herrington, Herrington, Hoban, & Reid, 2009; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004), particularly where the access to high quality oTPD activities has been identified as critically important (Borko, 2004).

One way to measure the success of TPD is to determine how effective the learning opportuni-

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