

Chapter 92

Information Superhighway and Continuous Professional Development for the Networked Teachers: Online Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the impact of technology on teacher training through online communities of practice (CoP) and investigates its potential for facilitating continuous professional development for the educators who can create personal learning networks on the web. Wenger's Community of Practice Theory (1998) and Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) are explored as underlying theories of CoP. Furthermore, examples of online communities of practice will be briefly enlisted. The chapter will provide brief information how online learning is operationalized within the confines of CoP. The chapter will also discuss role of online communities of practice for teachers' continuous professional development with reference to current literature, explore challenges and focus on suggestions and avenues for further research.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching requires teachers to be life-long learners to cater for the demands of continually changing terrain of educational contexts in the digital age. Being responsible for preparing their students to live and work in the changing world, teachers are required to sustain professional development to further their knowledge in a variety of areas including content, general pedagogy, curriculum, learners and their characteristics, educational contexts, educational purposes, values and aims, technology and pedagogical content knowledge. Therefore, many teachers take part in professional development endeavours to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5472-1.ch092

extend their knowledge and cope with shifts in education due to widespread diffusion of high speed internet and Web 2.0 tools. Educational technology provided educators with an innovative virtual means for professional development and collaboration. Many communities of online practice have ensured platforms in which geographically dispersed teachers can collaborate with others in sharing knowledge and exchanging their expertise through Web 2.0 tools, blogs, wikis, online discussion forums, e-mail list servers and social media tools. Consequently, members from diverse organizational and cultural backgrounds engage in professional dialogue extracting, creating and exchanging knowledge in order to help each other solve problems, tell stories of personal incidents and debate issues of shared interest. Therefore, online professional learning and the community of inquiry framework have important theoretical and practical implications for teacher development. This chapter is in pursuit of discussing affordances of CoPs and CoI framework for teachers' continuous professional development (CPD) and showcase some CoPs for the networked teachers.

Background

One of the influential community frameworks for educational settings, especially for professional development, is Wenger's Community of Practice Theory. According to Wenger's Community of Practice Theory (1998) humans are social beings and learning is a social endeavour. Therefore, knowledge within a social setting means being competent at activities which are valued within a community and knowing is developed through active engagement in the community through participation. Consequently, the goal of learning is to produce meaning or construct an understanding of the world and our engagement within it (Wenger, 1998, p.5). Community of practice (CoP) is conceptualised as a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). Similarly, Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p.9) define an online community as a cohesive and interactive community of learners whose purpose is to critically analyze, construct, and confirm worthwhile knowledge. CoPs encompass three essential components;

1. Domain,
2. Community, and
3. Practice.

Domain refers to the common ground on which participants coalesce around to share ideas and information while community entails a group of people who establish positive interpersonal relationships and mutual commitment. Practice on the other hand refers to shared knowledge, materials and tools generated within the community. CoPs have contributed to teachers' professional development because "through the ongoing collaboration and negotiation they (teachers) gain 'knowledge OF practice' which is more meaningful to them, rather than 'knowledge FOR practice' which is usually conveyed to them in workshops" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999 in Wang & Lu, 2012, p.431). However, at times joining a physical CoP may bring about several geographical and logistic constraints. Comparatively, an online CoP may function as a virtual venue in which a group of teachers can share ideas and information regardless of physical space and time.

Application of "community concept" to online professional learning was manifested through online communities of practice and innovations in technology played a significant role for the growth of inter-

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