Chapter 4

Changing the Metaphor
The Potential of Online Communities in Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Belonging to an online community offers teachers the opportunity to exchange ideas, make connections with a wider peer group and form collaborative networks. The increasing popularity of teacher professional communities means that we need to understand how they work and determine the role they may play in teacher professional development. This chapter will map data from a doctoral study to a recently-developed model of professional development to offer a new perspective of how online communities can add to a teacher's personal and professional growth and, in so doing, add to the small number of studies in this field. This chapter will conclude with a call for a revision of the way we approach professional development in the 21st Century and suggest that old models and metaphors are hindering the adoption of more effective means of professional development for teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Online communities provide continuous and self-generating professional development for teachers through flexible, authentic and personalised opportunities for learning. Teachers in many countries are looking to online communities for professional support, guidance and inspiration (Bond, 2004; Chen & Chen, 2002; Cornu, 2004; Matei, 2005) to supplement or replace more traditional forms of professional engagement. These communities – usually grouped around subject area disciplines – differ in their formality but display common characteristics of sharing and collaboration. The current popularity of online communities means that it has now become important to examine how they work and determine their role in facilitating teacher professional development. This chapter will offer a model of how online communities can add to a teacher's personal and professional growth and, in so doing, add to the small number of studies in this field (see, for example, Hawkes, 1999; Hunter,

2002). This chapter will conclude by arguing for revising the way we approach professional development in the 21ˢᵗ Century and suggest that old models and metaphors are hindering the adoption of more effective means of professional development for teachers.

In order to achieve its aims, this chapter will draw its understandings from two previous studies. The first (Lloyd, Cochrane & Beames, 2005), commissioned by an Australian teacher professional association, suggested an original model of effective teacher professional development that mapped potential reflexive paths between practice and theory. The second is a doctoral study (Duncan-Howell, 2007) investigating the role of online communities in teacher professional development that studied three distinct communities for teachers. Selected data from the latter study will be applied to the model suggested in the former. The outcome will be to validate the model in the context of online communities and to provide new insights into how online communities can support teacher professional development. It will also support the concluding argument of the chapter that a new metaphor is needed to show how new tools require a rethinking of professional development strategies particularly in how individual teachers take ownership of their own learning.

The chapter will develop its argument through four sections. It will begin by presenting the background to the discussion, that is, (a) a definition of online communities, and (b) an explanation of the professional development model (Lloyd & Cochrane, 2006; Lloyd et al., 2005) to be used as the framework for analysis. The second section of the chapter will deconstruct the model and use selected data from teacher focus groups, community transcripts (Duncan-Howell, 2007) and extant literature to substantiate the claim that participation in online communities can provide effective professional development opportunities for teachers. The third section will outline future trends in online collaborations for teachers while the fourth (and final) section will conclude the

chapter by suggesting a new metaphor for teacher professional development.

BACKGROUND

This section is intended to provide background to the discrete areas under review in this chapter. These, as previously noted, are (a) online communities, and (b) the professional development model to be used to interpret selected data.

Online Communities

Communities, or groups of people, are bound together through shared connections that transform individuals from a solitary status to membership of an identifiable group. A community is a phenomenon that is driven rather than something that just happens (Lechner, 1998). While some understandings of an online community can be taken from physical or traditional communities, it is critical to note that they are significantly different in structure and composition and frequently evidence greater diversity in membership than those bounded by location. The obvious and most critical difference is the absence of physical presence in online communities.

In this chapter, online communities for teachers are understood to be open and voluntary gatherings of individuals concerned with the general practice of teaching or specialist disciplines or areas of interest. A community of teachers is, by definition, a community of practice (after Lave & Wenger, 1991). While online communities make use of differing means of synchronous and asynchronous online communication, those considered in this chapter made exclusive use of email which is an asynchronous medium.

What online teacher communities have in common, irrespective of subject affiliation or interest and communication medium, is that individuals communicate in a shared social virtual space and share common goals. The instance

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