

Chapter IX

Virtual Learning and Real Communities: Online Professional Development for Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning is examined via the experiences of teachers participating in qualification-bearing online professional development courses while simultaneously engaging in everyday professional practice in the classroom. A “communities of practice” framework guides the interpretation of teachers’ perspectives of their membership, identity, activities and experiences in the online and school communities. While online courses tend to emphasise participation as a vital component of socially constructed learning in the virtual environment, the evidence from this study suggests that online courses can also promote the contextual learning opportunities which exist in the everyday experiences of teachers in their local communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is a term which is open to multiple interpretations and permutations, so much so, that has been questioned as a meaningless concept which encompasses all learning (Masie, 2006; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Conversely, it might also be argued that blended learning is a multi-faceted, complex concept offering insights

into ways that technologies, pedagogies, learning theories, and contexts might be combined to achieve optimal learning in different situations (Cross, 2006; Singh, 2006). This chapter examines blended learning from the perspective of practising teachers who combine online study with their everyday work as classroom teachers. The inclusion of school-based practical assignments as requirements of taught online courses

fosters a blended opportunity requiring teachers to engage, interact and participate in both virtual and real contexts. This integration of online ICT elements and situated learning in communities of practice can be exploited to provide an effective professional development model connecting theory and practice.

The research examined teachers' perceptions of their dual membership of online course-bound learning communities and school-based communities. The main research question embodied blended learning concepts by asking "how can qualification-bearing online professional development best support teachers' learning and practice within their professional communities of practice?" This research further develops an understanding of situated e-learning as knowledge in action, or "knowing in practice" (Gilbert, 2005; Schwen & Hara, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991) contributing to models and strategies for effective online professional development and an emerging understanding of blended learning. In essence, it is proposed that the boundaries and intersections between online learning communities and localised communities of practice provide an important context in which to examine blended learning and to gain insights into how multi-membership of different communities impacts on participation, identity and professional learning.

This work assumes that learning needs to be situated in real contexts, and that knowledge is not something which is transmitted and static, but rather something which is dynamic and evident as knowing in practice. The literature espousing communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) provides a lens through which to understand such learning and yet it also offers a critical stance from which to examine the locus and role of online learning. Professional development, by nature, should contribute to the professional learning of the participants, but the question is to what extent do current approaches in online, qualification-based professional development meet the real and diverse needs of teachers in schools? And furthermore,

how can an investigation of the complexities of teacher professional learning contribute to future strategies for online professional development?

Wenger (1998) frames learning in four dimensions as practice (doing), community (belonging), meaning (experience), and identity (becoming), suggesting that these dimensions are inter-related and over-lapping and that learning occurs as part of the natural processes of participating in communities of practice. Learning within communities of practice involves engagement in authentic tasks, and the communication and collaboration which relate to daily work and problem solving (Johnson, 2001). Participation in these practices is about 'learning to be' or identity formation (Wenger, 1998). Pertinent to this study is the concept that all forms of participation contribute to the formation of identity, and that multi-membership in different communities requires a process of reconciliation and negotiation between different practices and experiences. Wenger (1998, p. 218) holds that "multi-membership is a critical source of learning because it forces an alignment of perspectives in the negotiation of an engaged identity." Multi-membership of communities impacts the individual's identity, but also has the potential to influence communities as individuals act as brokers transferring the practices and artefacts of one context to another.

The role and potential of multi-membership of communities has also been acknowledged within the teacher professional development literature. Fullan (1999) makes a case for creating porous boundaries, fostering interactions beyond the organisation, and encouraging the boundary spanners who can make connections with external parties. Fullan holds that interactions beyond the boundaries of an organisation can prompt innovative thinking and create opportunities for converting tacit knowledge into more accessible forms. While his work identifies a range of interactions with parents, neighbourhoods, regional bodies and other agencies, he specifically mentions the role of professional development, and the inter-rela-

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