Preface

For many people in developed countries as well as some in developing countries—and particularly those people who are involved in higher education or professional careers—the Internet has infiltrated everyday life. It has come to satisfy a wide variety of the social, information, and communication needs of these people. They carry around smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Weekly family phone calls are replaced by Skyping, and friends and family know what each other are doing based on Facebook updates rather than personal communication. Questions are answered by Google, often supported by the kindly shared knowledge and experiences of strangers.

This ubiquity of the Internet has also spread across the various sectors or activities of peoples’ lives. The information that people access online helps them at home, work, and school. It facilitates making plans with other people for personal and professional purposes. It is a flexible and extending tool; and if one has an Internet-connected device constantly close at hand their range of knowledge abilities can readily be extended.

In an educational context, the Internet has become a popular platform for supporting both learning and performance. Use of the Internet to support formal learning is well known and established. As Bonk and Dennen (2003) noted, there is a continuum of Web integration in college courses that ranges from having a syllabus online or encouraging students to explore Web-based resources to teaching online as part of a larger online degree program or initiative. At that time, the continuum was being used in part to encourage instructors to think about how they could enter the online learning arena and gradually incorporate the Internet more holistically in their teaching. However, such encouragement is no longer needed. Whereas fifteen years ago the instructors who put materials online or taught online were the minority, today the minority group is comprised of instructors who have no Web integration in their courses. And according to the Babson Survey Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2011), as of 2011 more than 1/3 of all higher education students in the United States are taking at least one online course.

At the same time, there is a tremendous amount of learning that takes place online that is not formally noted as learning. It simply occurs as people engage with each other via social networking tools and other Web 2.0 technologies. For example, a person might come up with a question in the course of a workday and send out a tweet to her personal network, seeing if anyone has an answer. Should she receive an answer, both the original questioner and people within her network may learn from the response. Another person might practice learning a new language by interacting with other people at a website like LiveMocha (livemocha.com) in anticipation of an upcoming business trip. A new teacher might blog about her experiences in the classroom, only to find at the end of her first school year that she has both generated a rich document reflecting on her own professional development and developed a network of informal mentors and supporters who leave useful comments. Concurrently, a pre-service
teacher might be reading her blog with keen interest, trying to glean as much as possible about what the real first-year teaching experience is like. These are all examples of the types of informal learning that are supported by the Internet and motivated by the individual learner’s desire or need to know something.

Whether learners are already actively engaged in a profession or still preparing to enter a profession, these informal learning interactions enhance their formal education and professional experiences. Granted, not everyone engages in these types of informal learning activities; these individuals represent a sub-set of their larger professional community, not all of whom have sought or may wish to seek online interaction. Still, the robust nature of these online interactions and their surrounding communities, often developed in a bottom-up fashion, indicates the value of Web 2.0-based interaction for a portion of the population.

This idea of people engaging in informal learning experiences, often facilitated by their social networks, did not originate with the Internet, but certainly has been facilitated by it. Informal, voluntary professional development activities allow people to focus on individual learning needs as they arise. These opportunities do not replace formal education and training, which should focus on core knowledge and skills within the profession. Instead, they enhance formal experiences by providing a platform through which individualization, social networking, mentoring, and knowledge brokering all may take place. Thus, the power of informal online learning and professional development is in supporting individuals as they determine their own learning needs and, typically through interaction with others, find pertinent and timely ways of meeting those needs. Ironically, these activities may not be validated by the organizations in which people work as true learning or professional development, because they are free to participants, are not typically led by “experts” (or are led by self-proclaimed experts, such as the Pro-As discussed by Leadbeater and Miller [2004] and Gee [2009]), are socially constructed, may include personal/off-topic chatter, are not formally assessed, and do not result in a certification or degree. Still, these activities fill an important gap in professional learning because they enable on-the-job knowledge exchange and teach what is not or what cannot be taught in formal environments.

We decided to edit this book because we felt strongly that informal learning in online environments deserves more recognition for the role that it plays in professional development. This trend is only likely to increase as time passes and more individuals are exposed to it. Because some individuals come to this form of professional development naturally, whereas others are introduced via formal learning experiences, we wanted to highlight not only online learning that clearly takes place in an informal manner, but also those experiences that may initially introduce or lead a learner to the online environments in which informal learning and virtual professional development thrive. For example, a student may first learn about using Twitter and blogs as part of a course experience, or a worker may find out about an online professional network while participating in a training session or webinar. Each may then engage with these networks independently at a later time for continued professional development.

Figure 1 demonstrates our conceptualization of the field of learning as it relates to this book. On the horizontal axis, we draw a continuum from school-based learning to workplace learning. The assumption is that a good deal of learning will occur as part of a degree program and be continued or extended in the workplace. Whereas school-based learning tends to be focused on earning a certificate or degree and provides foundational and general knowledge of a field, workplace learning tends to be more situated in the specific objectives and practices of the work context. Notably absent from this continuum is personal or hobby-related learning. While we do not mean to diminish either the importance or relevance of this type of learning, in this book we are focusing on learning that is connected to professional development.

The vertical axis is a continuum that represents degree of formality. The most formal of learning experiences typically are instructor-centered and are situated in a classroom—physical or virtual. In
contrast, participants may not even recognize the most informal learning experiences as being about learning—as opposed to everyday life—although learning is certainly a byproduct of most interactions in everyday life.

A few examples have been placed on the figure to demonstrate a diverse, non-exhaustive range of online activities that may foster learning. Note that courses and training sessions are located directly at the formal end of the continuum, whereas other online learning activities such as professional development webinars (which some people might categorize using a third term, non-formal learning, to indicate a clearly designed learning experience with objectives that does not contribute to a degree or certificate) might represent varying levels of formality depending on the context (e.g., required by employer or voluntary). Other activities, like reflective blogging, tend to range in formality as the context shifts; most reflective blogging in higher education is done as a course requirement, whereas most workplace-based reflective bloggers engage in the activity of their own volition. Involvement in social networks, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, is placed fully at the informal end of the continuum because learning in those forums is typically a byproduct of other activities such as networking or even socializing.

The chapters contained in this book range from those that focus on more formal learning experiences that may introduce people to and lead them to participate in online professional development activities to those that represent true informal learning and professional development experiences in online environments. We have divided the book into five sections, each of which represents a different focus. The earlier chapters, appearing in Sections 1 and 2, provide many foundational and theoretical concepts, whereas the latter chapters (Sections 3, 4, and 5) represent empirical studies and cases of virtual professional development.

Throughout the book a range of contexts are addressed, from learning that is somewhat situated in formal environments to learning that is entirely informal, and from school-based to workplace-based learning. Figure 2 provides a visual reference for the diverse coverage provided by the chapters. Where appropriate, chapters are clustered together to indicate a similar position on the axes. Bi-directional arrows represent types of learning that might be included in two quadrants, depending on context (e.g.,

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*Figure 1. Ranges of learning experiences*
degree-seeking students using the same technology to support classroom learning and extracurricular learning). The unidirectional arrow indicates chapters that are situated in one quadrant but which represent experiences that are preparing learners to continue engaging in learning in another quadrant. These cross-quadrant (formal to informal) chapters provide a good reminder that there is a fair degree of fluidity involved when defining or categorizing learning experiences and that learning experiences set in one context or setting may impact either continued learning or other related activities in another context or setting.

The first three chapters provide a general overview of issues related to virtual professional development and informal learning via social networks. Each chapter gives insight into various factors that should be considered on this topic. In Chapter 1, “Professional Development through Web 2.0 Collaborative Applications,” Williams and Olaniran discuss the impact that Web 2.0 has had on collaboration and professional development. This chapter provides a solid overview of tools like blogs and wikis, making it particularly helpful for any readers who are less familiar with social media. Further, the authors provide insight into cultural, financial, and policy challenges that need to be considered when using these tools.

Another challenge or concern that arises when using social media tools is privacy. The free flow of information on the Internet may be considered a double-edged sword, helping people learn through the open exchange of ideas while at the same time putting people and organizations at risk if too much or the wrong information is self-disclosed in an online environment. In Chapter 2, “Web 2.0, the Individual, and the Organization: Privacy, Confidentiality, and Compliance,” Burner discusses the privacy and confidentiality-related complexities of using Web 2.0 technologies for informal professional development. Additionally, she provides examples of and insights into policies that might help protect both individuals and organizations from unnecessary risk while still allowing them to participate in online professional learning experiences.

Although many people will first visualize sitting at a computer when the topic of online learning is mentioned, mobile devices have entered the online learning arena and bring with them additional possibilities for professional development. In Chapter 3, “Turn On Your Mobile Devices: Potential and Considerations of Informal Mobile Learning,” Hao provides an overview of mobile learning and discusses how it adds another layer of options for people who seek information and interactions at the tips of their fingers, even while on the go. Hao examines the strengths and drawbacks that surround informal mobile learning and discusses lessons learned from the previous research literature for educators and researchers approaching this topic.

Section 2 brings together three chapters that present different lenses and perspectives for considering informal learning and professional development in a virtual environment. In Chapter 4, “An Activity Theoretical Approach to Examining Virtual Professional Development and Informal Learning via Social Networks,” Terantino demonstrates how activity theory can be applied in a social network setting to analyze the interactions that occur among individuals and the tools, communities, and artifacts that help them obtain their objectives.

In Chapter 5, “Applying Social Network Analysis and Social Capital in Personal Learning Environments of Informal Learning,” Chen, Choi, and Yu explore how people build personal learning networks when using Web 2.0 technologies. With the help of social network analysis, they demonstrate how these networks might be analyzed. Through analysis of these networks, it becomes possible both to see how individuals interact with each other and with various tools as well as to document the presence and development of social capital.
This section closes with Chapter 6, titled, “Linguistic Aspects of Informal Learning in Corporate Online Social Networks.” In this chapter, Bielenia-Grajewska highlights the role that language plays in the development and use of social networks. Online social interactions are inherently language-based, and most frequently involve written texts. Focusing on informal corporate contexts, she demonstrates how language can bring people together or keep them apart, stressing the roles that homophily, membership, and power play in our linguistic interactions.

The last three sections of the book present empirical research and cases that examine online professional development and informal learning experiences. The three sections each are focused on a different setting or context: higher education (Section 3), pre- and in-service education (Section 4), and the workplace (Section 5).

In Chapter 7, “Creating Ongoing Online Support Communities through Social Networks to Promote Professional Learning,” Corbeil and Corbeil provide examples of one instructor’s success as he pushed students in his online graduate courses to extend their learning experience beyond the walls of the virtual classroom. The chapter addresses how these online graduate courses were designed, how the social networking tools were used to enhance communication and interaction, and how the instructor established networks that continued after the courses had ended, providing a model for how others might do the same.

In Chapter 8, “Developing Professional Competencies through International Peer Learning Communities,” Yakavena discusses how blogs were used to support informal learning among students during internship experiences. These students were placed in professional positions in several different countries, and then were united via the technology. She found that overall the emergent learning community led to positive experiences for these students.

Christensen and Saltiel focus on ways of uniting faculty rather than students. In Chapter 9, “Use of Social Network Analysis to Create and Foster Interdisciplinary Research, Projects, and Grants among Faculty,” they describe a university-based social network designed to support peer mentoring, knowledge
brokering, and resource sharing. The intended objective of their program was to increase interdisciplinary research and scholarly collaboration among faculty, who might seek grants together or co-publish. The end result of collaborations fostered by this informal social network would support both the careers of the participating individuals as well as the overall mission of the university.

The authors of Chapter 10, “Social Media as a Learning Tool in Medical Education: A Situation Analysis,” consider both formal and informal uses of social media by medical students. Vahe, Zain-Ul-Abdin, and Türel review the current research literature to identify both trends and gaps. Surprisingly, for as much as the literature in this area discusses social media and ways in which it might be used, the actual number of empirical studies is quite low.

Section 4 shifts the focus from higher education in general to teacher education, beginning with Chapter 11, “It’s All about Personal Connections: Pre-Service English Teachers’ Experiences Engaging in Networked Learning.” Rodseiler and Tripp examine the experiences of pre-service English teachers during their internships, examining how online interactions helped pre-service teachers extend their learning experiences beyond the internship. The chapter looks specifically at how the pre-service teachers perceived this social learning experience as a way of supporting self-regulated informal learning and, in the future, as a possible avenue for continued professional development.

In Chapter 12, “Online Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development and Change of Novice and Experienced Teachers: A Brazilian Experience,” Reali, Tancredi, and Mizukami examine an online mentoring program that connects novice K-12 teachers with experienced K-12 teachers. This online mentoring program was designed to help the novice teachers overcome some of the professional challenges that they often face and to contribute to the professional development of these teachers. The authors provide insight into the process of creating such a program and indicate how similar programs could be beneficial for others.

The last chapter in this section examines research conducted on a self-generated online teaching community. In Chapter 13, “An Analysis of Teacher Knowledge and Emotional Sharing in a Teacher Blog Community,” Hur, Brush, and Bonk investigate a community of teachers on LiveJournal, looking for trends and patterns in teacher activity. They found that the community supports teacher professional development by offering a platform that simultaneously fosters sharing a variety of knowledge related to teaching and expressing one’s feelings about the profession.

The last section of the book, Section 5, focuses on workplace learning. Chapter 14, “Twitter-Based Knowledge Sharing in Professional Networks: The Organization Perspective,” considers how professional organizations might support ongoing professional development for their memberships by using Twitter. Dennen and Jiang analyze the Twitter feeds of six organizations, looking for trends in both content and use of Twitter features. Their findings have implications for how these organizations might act as both knowledge providers and knowledge brokers as well as how they might use the technology to bring together a learning community.

In Chapter 15, “Story-Based Professional Development Using a Conflict Management Wiki,” Slabon and Richards discuss how learning can be supported cross-organization by sharing real world stories in a wiki environment. They present a particular case in which former students in a class that used a restorying technique were invited to join a wiki where they could share professional stories. A survey was used to learn about participants’ attitudes and approaches toward using this wiki, allowing the authors to consider both the successes and the shortcomings of this medium and approach.

In Chapter 16, “Dermatological Telemedicine Diagnoses and Andragogical Training Using Web 2.0 Mobile Medicine Video Conferencing,” Brandt and Rice share a case study about how Web 2.0-based
video conferencing was used to help dermatologists engage in both diagnosis with patients and ongoing professional development with other doctors. They show how this approach supports problem-based learning and can provide learning opportunities for physicians regardless of their geographic location.

Collectively, these sixteen chapters cross over diverse territory. They represent learning from the perspectives of both people who are engaged in the process and people who are supporting the process, and in some instances individuals who may be engaged in both of those roles. They consider both emotional and knowledge-based needs and outcomes, and represent a variety of technologies and learning techniques. Still, we recognize that these chapters merely scratch the surface in terms of representing the myriad of virtual professional development and informal online learning experiences that take place these days.

In closing, we hope that this book serves as a catalyst for initiating a greater conversation about this topic among education professionals and researchers. Although virtual professional development and informal online learning in many cases are not as controlled or designed as more traditional forms of learning, they nonetheless are having a big influence on their participants. The individual learners engaged in virtual professional development will certainly keep moving forward and continue to explore the various opportunities that the Internet offers them, and those opportunities will continue to grow each day as new tools are developed and as more people with mutual interests find each other online. The roles that remain open for educators and researchers, then, are that of collaborator, investigator, instructional designer, and knowledge broker; they can learn from and with the people who are already engaged in the practice of virtual professional development, and in turn share the practice with other educators, researchers, and learners.

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REFERENCES


