Chapter I

Online Communities and Professional Teacher Learning: Affordances and Challenges

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Abstract

This chapter examines online communities for professional teacher learning, in the context of a mixed-mode practice-based Masters degree, the Master of Teaching. It problematises key principles for designing collaborative learning online, aimed at developing teachers’ dispositions and values, as well as critical understandings that inform professional knowledge about practice. Data from teachers’ asynchronous online discussions are analysed, and the discussion is grounded in the learning activities of course participants. The authors establish the contemporary context for developing teachers’ professional learning through the affordances of new technologies, with a view to establishing what claims can be made about the potential of online communities to provide a counter to reductive models of professional development that have dominated teachers’ learning in England and Wales in recent years.
Introduction

This chapter is grounded in research and development work in the area of professional teacher learning on an award-bearing programme conducted by 10 plus higher education tutors, and some 100 plus master’s level students. The sample of primary data presented here draws on asynchronous online discussions that took place within a tutor group of 15 teacher participants, over a total 9 month period, as part of the programme. Grounded in actual practice, the chapter discusses a number of design principles for online communities for professional teacher learning, with a view to sketching out the beginnings of a conceptual and theoretical framework for the area. Invariably, in view of the limited space available, some key issues and notions are being dealt with rather cursorily, and only a comparatively small snapshot of primary data can be presented and analysed. Readers are encouraged to engage with a range of other outputs by the authors, where some of these issues are discussed in more depth (see references). The main body of the chapter draws on the data from three online discussions, each lasting 4 to 5 weeks, that took place within a password-protected forum. Participants are identified here by the first letter of their forenames (for example, Teacher K), and they form an online tutor group of 15 primary, secondary, and special school teachers with between 2 to 5 years teaching experience. Their writings have contributed to our refinement of the design principles for learning within online discursive communities that are set out below. Contemporary contextual factors, which have informed our conceptualisation of teacher learning in this environment, are presented at the beginning of the chapter.

New Technologies and Professional Teacher Learning: The Context

The role of new technologies in professional teacher learning is an area that is as yet scarcely explored, despite the huge expansion of these technologies in schools, and the education system in general, over the past decade. Teachers in England and Wales now work routinely with electronic media in carrying out a range of professional duties, both managerial and pedagogic. While we do not subscribe to the conventional dystopia, dystopia polarisations, the transformation of the school into a workplace supported by new technology has both huge potential for teacher learning and the transformation of teacher roles. But it also carries with it the danger of teachers being subsumed into the reductive discourse of efficiency and effectiveness, within a political agenda driven by an
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