Chapter 9
The Shluvim Social–Professional Network: 
A Bridge for Educational Challenges and Trailblazers in Education

Smadar Bar-Tal
Levinsky College of Education, Israel

Tami Seifert
Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology, and the Arts, Israel

ABSTRACT
Establishment of the Shluvim network in 2010 responded to the Israeli education profession’s need to introduce innovative pedagogical challenges. This social-professional network provides a virtual space for its members, empowering them through discussion on different aspects of education. The article describes a case study, employing both qualitative and quantitative methodology (questionnaires and interviews), to identify the dynamics of quantitative components involved in the development of the network and to elicit members’ experiences in the communication process. Findings reveal challenges involved in informed use of social networking in education and show how participation in the professional network can assist members’ professional development, although it is necessary to adapt to changes in usage patterns and competition with alternative social networks. The research enhances understanding of the social-professional network’s role as an empowering environment for the Israeli education system in general and for teachers’ education and professional development in particular.

INTRODUCTION
The last decade has witnessed the introduction and growth of international social networks for a wide range of populations. On these networks millions of people from the farthest reaches of the globe communicate in dozens of languages. This social phenomenon has led to the growth and activity of networks of different scopes and types. The largest of the networks usually focus on social activity and sometimes
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relate to professional issues. Others are more specific and professional in nature and many are entirely devoted to professional matters. This platform has become increasingly widespread among professional communities aiming to promote their members’ professional development. In the education field, a small number of social networks operate in different countries.

In 2010, the MOFET Institute decided to construct a professional-social network for teacher-educators and all those working in education named “Shluvim”. This network is a pioneer initiative in Israel in the Hebrew language intended to bring different types of educators together on a single platform in a social network to allow them a place where they can expose their innovative work on a national and international level, in the areas of education and teacher-training. It also aims to provide a response for educators who are native Hebrew speakers and/or using Hebrew as a language for interpersonal and group communication. When the present study was conducted, there were 2,200 educators belonging to 152 groups in various areas of education, who had been active in Shluvim at different times: groups that had been active from the moment that they were set up until today, and groups that were opened for limited periods of time for example for supplementary courses or to accompany conferences. The network includes groups which discuss various topics in education, disciplinary issues and pedagogic aspects. The number of groups has grown and today there are more than 200 such groups. One of the main components of the network is a central blog that deals with “hot” issues in education. Additionally, the network permits broad access to various tools. Membership of the network is free of charge, voluntary and open to any educator. There are members who join as individuals or as members of a topic group in order to lead debate on a certain idea or “burning” dilemma in education or as a participant in a course. There are also passive participants who suffice with reading information that is published by others, without publishing anything themselves or contributing materials. These passive participants are known as “lurkers” (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001).

The activity on the Shluvim network has been investigated in research studies relating to the contribution of the network to the promotion of collaborative professional discourse. These studies have examined the types of activity in the different groups and types of activity of the individual learners on the network, using network theory and characteristics of blogs to analyze connections between members (Bar-Tal & Seifert, 2014; Goldstein, 2014; Mor, 2014) and also examining leadership of groups and activity of master’s degree courses using the professional network (Lotan, 2012). These studies did not deal with the contribution of the Shluvim network to members’ professional development, one of the main purposes of this network. Moreover, the studies in this area have not examined the challenges that the Shluvim network poses for its members and leaders. These aspects of the network are very important for its future design due to changes in its scope and the type of use that users employ in this and other world social networks and in various discussion channels available to educators. The present study aims to fill these gaps in knowledge.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Teachers’ Professional Development and Identity

Teachers’ empowerment processes are one of the main factors influencing the perception of professional identity and its construction (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kosminski & Klavier, 2010). There is a strong probability that empowered teachers will encourage the empowerment of others (Somech, 2005).