Twitter Chats and the Evolution of Teacher Professional Development

Tutaleni I. Asino
Scott Haselwood
Alesha Baker
Oklahoma State University
United States
tutaleni.asino@okstate.edu
scott.haselwood@okstate.edu
alesha.baker@okstate.

Abstract: As various technologies become accessible to educational professionals, a new space is emerging for teachers to gather and connect with each other. Particularly, the social media landscape has options such as Twitter, where teachers can regularly connect with each other and their own chosen experts. In this paper we use data from #oklaed TwitterChats, to examine how social media is changing the practice of Teacher Professional Development (TPD). Specifically, we seek to find if Twitter offers an alternative space for TPD. Our findings indicate that the future of professional development in teaching and learning institutions may not hinge only on the institutions choosing when TPD will occur, but in finding ways to incorporate the way teachers use their own Professional Learning Network (PLN) as a source of TPD.

Introduction

Professional Development (PD) occurs in all fields, for different reasons and in a variety of ways. In education, for example, it has long been recognized that one way to improve education systems is through a continued development of teacher and administrators (Abdal-Haqq, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2000; NCTAF, 1996; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Specifically, PD is seen as a way for teachers to improve their craft by acquiring greater competency and efficiency to discharge their professional obligations (Komba & Nkumbi, 2008). For years, PD has been available to teachers in the form of in-service training sessions or workshops to provide teachers with new information on a particular aspect of their work (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). At the same time, scholars such as Barab, MaKinster, Moore, & Cunningham, 2001; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; and Richardson, 1990 have long argued that "new models for professional development are needed, models that foster a culture of sharing, and provide sustained support (i.e., knowledge of Teacher Professional Development networks) for teachers as they evaluate both their beliefs and practices" (Barab et al. 2001, p.72). Currently, technologies exist that make such models possible and also enable for a reexamination.

Literature Review

Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development (TPD) can be defined in different ways. Guskey (2002) views it as a "systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students" (p. 381). While Rhodes, Stokes, and Hampton, (2004) regard it as series of activities intended to "increase the skills, knowledge or understanding of teachers, and their effectiveness in schools" (p.2). What is commonly agreed upon is that PD is a critical component to teachers who use it as an opportunity to improve their practice.

TPD occurs in formal and informal forms. Formally, it can take place locally, at a district level and through conferences. At a local level this can include the organization of a workshop for teachers in a building or in one department. This could be cost effective but only if the local area has the desired expertise. At a district level, it can be handled by bringing in an outside expert to talk with teachers on a designated topic. Although appealing, there is the added expense of paying for the speaker and sometimes that cost can be prohibitive. Teachers also have options

to attend conferences for PD. Conferences generally provide teachers with an opportunity to have a learning need met, but sometimes the cost of attending is unaffordable in terms of financial cost and travel time.

As various technologies become accessible to educational professionals, a new space is emerging for teachers to gather and connect with each other. Particularly, the social media landscape has options such as Twitter, which has become a place, to regularly connect with each other and with various experts (Trust, 2012). The overall research question that emerges from this is: how is social media changing the practice of TPD. Specifically, is Twitter offering an alternative space for TPD?

Online PD Communities

Opportunities for knowledge attainment in the field of education have grown to new levels with the introduction of online PD communities which allow for freedom from constraints of time and place (Tseng & Kuo, 2010). While some educators attend conferences, read professional journals, or take higher education courses, others become active in online PD communities. These online communities allow for opportunities to collaborate with and learn from other professionals. Content of online PD communities may be broad to include a wide variety of skills and content knowledge, while others are specific to one area of educational field, practice, or pedagogy.

Although online PD can be convenient and provide relevant professional growth for teachers, consideration must be made as to what affordances a computer interface may offer to increase effectiveness and active communication among the participants. Many of the information sharing technologies have affordances which allow for divergent modes of interaction (Jeppesen & Laursen, 2009). Some modes may hinder participation while others may promote more knowledge sharing behaviors. Jeppesen and Laursen (2009) investigated the characteristics of "lead users" within online learning communities. They found that users placed in the leadership role are those participants who actively provide knowledge to the group, use novel sources of such knowledge, and assume a "boundary-spanning and gate keeping role" (p. 1587). By assuming a leader within the virtual group and formally or informally guiding participants through rules and guidelines, more effective communication between peers may be attained by promoting more diverse perspectives (Capponi, Nussbaum, Marshall, & Lagos, 2010).

Method

This research employs a case study research method. What distinguishes the case study method and makes it preferable for this study was its potential to help researchers situate this case in its historical context and the three common characteristics that Yin (2009) argues are integral to its definition. Specifically, a case study is marked by its concern with the questions of "how" and "why"; the researchers lack of "control over the events"; and the researcher's' interest in a "contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context."

The present study explores how twitter serves as an alternative space for TPD. Twitter is a social media microblogging website, which allows communication through 140 characters at a time. Like other social media websites, account holders can follow different people, un-follow those one chooses to disassociate from, favorite tweets to be viewed later, and retweet what resonates with the individual. Participation in Twitter occurs both synchronously through a TwitterChat and asynchronously by sharing thoughts during the day.

An example of a synchronous chat occurs every Sunday from 8-9pm, when educators gather on line for #oklaed, a TwitterChat for Oklahoma state educators. #oklaed is a live Twitter event, moderated and focused around an educational topic. To ensure that participants do not get lost on twitter, the hashtag #oklaed is used to filter all the chatter (Cooper, 2003) into a single conversation. A set time is also established and a moderator is available to engage in the conversation. While some TwitterChats do not have a designated leader or moderator guiding the chat, the #oklaed and #wyoedchat designates a moderator for each of their weekly chat sessions.

To understand the role of Twitter as a TPD tool, this study utilizes three datasets: Tweets from #oklaed, surveys results and interview. First, we analyze the content of tweets from participants using #oklaed to understand the content and conversations in which teachers are engaged. Second we use the #oklaed hashtag to recruit participants for a web-based survey of educators who tweet using the hashtag; lastly, we conduct interviews with moderators of the #oklaed discussions.

Results

Tweets from #oklaed

We examined three #Oklaed TwitterChats. These chats took place on 7th February (1077 tweets), 14th February (896 tweets), and 21st February (615 tweets). The choice to begin on the 7th was based on when the researchers received clearance from the Institutional Review Board to start the study. For the first session the #oklaed chat was also open to #wyoedchat which may explain the increase in the numbers. As figure 1 shows, the #oklaed twitter chat topics ranged from legislative policy updates to curriculum issues to advanced degrees for teachers in education to community outreach.
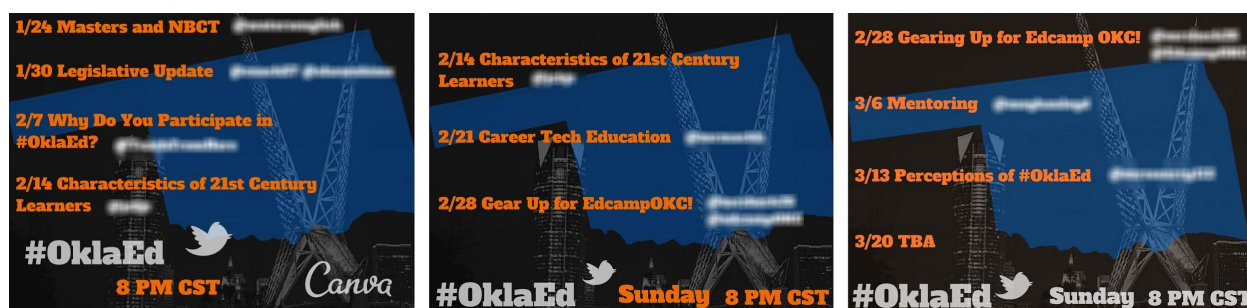

Figure 1 - #oklaed TwitterChat topics

As can be seen in figure 1, the three topics that occurred during the time frame of our study were: "why do you participate in #oklaed," "characteristics of 21st Century Learners," and "Career Tech Education." The first topic (7th February), was chosen by the researchers who also participate in #oklaed regularly. As table 1 further support, the teachers in #oklaed are engaged in conversation that TPD.

Table 1 - #oklaed tweets

My TwitterPD takes me away from the monotony of the trad.PD. We're in the tec era, why not use it to bring us together #oklaed #wyoedchat
I have been able to build the states greatest leadership team with the benefit of #oklaed
Traditional PDs can be long and boring and sometimes don't pertain to everyone at the same time! #oklaed #wyoedchat
I like finding people who think like me.......out of the box. #wyoedchat #OklaEd
We need 2 not only prepare Ss 2 fill jobs, but create jobs too. Focus on bldg inherent skills & talents rather than fixing def. #oklaed
Career Tech educators need to focus on the importance of career information and plans of study. #oklaed
It will be a growing industry. Cost and regulations will close smaller facilities. Rural areas will have a hard time. #Oklaed

Survey

Demographics

A total of 22 participants responded to the survey. There is a variety of stakeholders who participate in #oklaed from classroom teachers, to district administrators, community members, legislators, and college professors. The demographic breakdown is provided in table 2.

Table 2 - Demographics

Gender		Frequency of participating in #oklaed TwitterChats	
Male	27%	No, I have never participated	25%
Female	73%	I have participated once	15%
Highest earned academic degree		I rarely participate (e.g. a few times a year)	15%
Bachelor	41%	Frequently (at least twice a month)	45%
Master's	59%		
Years teaching		**Years at current school**	
0 - 5	18%	0 - 5	64%
6yrs-10yrs	4%	6yrs-10yrs	14%
11-20yrs	50%	11-20yrs	4%
21 - 27yrs	14%	21 - 27yrs	18%
28-31years	14%	28-31years	0%
Primary status			
Teacher	64%		
Administrator	27%		
Other	9%		

Four items on the survey shed more light on the role of TwitterChats in TPD according to those who participated in the study.

Q1. Where do you go for professional development?

Response to this question revealed categories of "official" and "unofficial" TPD that participants reported engaging in. As one participant noted – *""Official" - Workshops, District Training, and published texts (books, articles, etc). "Unofficial" - conversations with other educators both in person and via Twitter"*

Q2. Why have you participated in the #oklaed TwitterChats?

Participants reported that they take part in TwitterChats for a variety of reasons, such as connecting with other educators, learning new ideas as well as to learn about political issues affecting their profession. The response that best capture this is the following: *"I participate to 1. build my PLN. 2. discuss topics that are current and relevant to educating kids in Oklahoma. 3. To learn about current legislation. 4. Because #oklaed is a team - I like being part of a united group of educators working to make a difference for our kids."*

Q3. Should teachers be given credit for using social media as place for professional development?

There was a near unanimous agreement on whether social media platforms such as twitter should be recognized as a valid form of TPD. 95% of participants agreed that teachers should be given credit for participating in Twitter. However there was a recognition that it may be difficult to document participation. As one participant stated, *"I have done quite a bit of independent study on topics of my own interest and applied what l learned in my classroom and/or shared with colleagues. While I think that social media has been a useful source of professional growth for me, I also am not quit sure how to assign credit. Districts would need a clear set of criteria to do so."*

Q4. Have you used something from Twitter chats in your practice?

78% of participants reported using what they gained from TwitterChat in their practice. However, the use is not only curriculum based but also for support as indicated in the quote below "Oh yes! I use Twitter to get a lot of really great ideas. Mostly, I find encouragement in knowing that I am not facing problems in the classroom alone."

Interview

Interviews were also conducted with people who have moderated an #oklaed TwitterChat in the past. The job of a moderator includes choosing a theme the chat will revolve around, and generating questions to prompt conversations periodically during the chat. Those who had moderated a chat were contacted via tweet to participate in an interview through a skype. Arrangements for interviews were made through direct messaging on Twitter. These interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed.

Interviews led further support to tweet analysis and the survey by indicating that Twitter is viewed as TPD by educators at all levels. In one interview, a professor shared that Twitter provides an opportunity to connect with k-12 teachers. These relationships then help the professor better prepare pre-service teachers for future careers. A district tech coach also saw Twitter as viable TPD saying that there were opportunities to learn through Twitter that were not available in their small community. The tech coach also felt that TwitterChats were more relevant than traditional face-to-face TPD.

Conclusion

One original motivation behind this research was to investigate how emerging technologies or emerging environments can inform or impact Teacher Professional Development. Teachers are bringing their personal technologies into educational environments that they use and are source of their support. They are engaging particularly in social environments that may not be initiated by the institution but are serving as a source of building knowledge. In other words, they are leveraging social capabilities to expose themselves to divergent perspectives and deepen their understanding.

Knowing this, an adjustment of professional development expectations is need. Our findings indicate that the future of professional development in teaching and learning institutions may not hinge only on the institutions choosing when TPD will occur, but in finding ways to incorporate the way teachers use their own Professional Learning Network (PLN) as a source of TPD. In other words, the TPD of the future may need to better recognize what teachers are doing on their own and offer the necessary acknowledgement.

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