

Chapter 30

Using Twitter to Form Professional Learning Communities:

An Analysis of Georgia K–12 School Personnel Discussing Educational Technology on Twitter

Mete Akcaoglu

Georgia Southern University, USA

Charles B. Hodges

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3918-9261>

Georgia Southern University, USA

Lucas John Jensen

Georgia Southern University, USA

ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important tool for informal teacher professional development. Although there is a growing body of research investigating issues across the US, there is a lack of research on teacher professional development taking place on Twitter in Georgia, USA. In this research, the authors applied digital methods to analyze 5,425 entries from educators participating in a state-level, weekly, synchronous chat about educational technology (#TECHTalkGA) on the social media platform Twitter. Findings include that participants utilized the chat for organization, planning, and classroom technologies, with a predilection toward specific hardware and software topics. Limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers are required to maintain their professional knowledge, and the process of maintaining current professional knowledge often is described as *professional development*. Professional development can be categorized as formal or informal (Hodges, 2015). Formal professional development often is experienced in traditional formats such as face-to-face workshops, conference sessions, or webinars led by an expert or experts. Informal professional development may take many forms, but increasingly online social networking tools are utilized. Professional development was the most common educational purpose for social networking identified in the reviewed literature (Galvin & Greenhow, 2020, p. 21).

In addition to formal forms of teacher professional development, teachers have accepted informal professional development experiences such as EdCamp meetings or online professional learning networks (e.g. Carpenter, 2014; Trust et al., 2014). One platform for informal online professional development has been through communicating (e.g., sharing resources) through social media (Rosenberg et al., 2016; Greenhalgh et al., 2020). These informal professional development experiences are typically not led by a single expert, but are led by teachers, for teachers. The focus of this paper is a specific use of the free-to-access online service Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>) as a professional learning network by education professionals. .

BACKGROUND

Online Education and Online Professional Learning

In the last two decades, the mainstream growth of the Internet has led to transformative change in education, particularly higher education, as the Internet has provided new opportunities for online and distance learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Commensurate with this change has been a rise in the sphere of online activity known as social media – networks of users tied together via Web 2.0-based applications that offer individuals an opportunity to generate and share content of their own (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Noting that the term *social media* is hard to define in a world where almost all technologies feature a social component, Kaplan and Haelein (2010) defined *social media* as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow creation and exchange of user generated content” (p. 61). Examples of social media are large social networks like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, or sites like Instagram and YouTube, which focus on one type of media.

Online education has been steadily growing, and as of 2008, nearly 4.6 million students were enrolled in some form of online education (Gabriel, 2010). Recent economic downturns have driven millions of people to look online for new learning opportunities and careers. Between 2007 and 2010, online education enrollment increased 25% (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Universities – whether public, private, or for profit – are increasingly pushing online education as part of their curricula (Gabriel, 2010). In some cases, online education is considered necessary for these institutions’ long-term survival (Gabriel, 2010; Kaya, 2010). As universities and other institutions of higher education move to implement more online education, they also struggle with the quality of the education (Kaya, 2010). Lack of engagement and motivation is seen as one of the central problems in the current landscape of online education. Online education – sometimes known as e-learning – offers significant advantages in

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