Chapter 11
It's All about Personal Connections:
Pre-Service English Teachers' Experiences Engaging in Networked Learning

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ABSTRACT

Given the potential of informal online learning via social networks for supporting the career-long professional growth of in-service teachers, research must be conducted to better understand the ways in which today's future teachers are being prepared for and experiencing such practice. This chapter presents the authors' efforts to move in that direction, a qualitative study describing six pre-service secondary English language arts teachers' perceptions of self-directed networked learning during a teaching internship. Findings suggest that participants perceived networked learning as a viable and valuable approach to supplementing professional growth despite also perceiving challenges in the form of context, identity, and time.

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2009, we had the pleasure of working with pre-service secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers as they explored the potential of Web 2.0 applications for supporting literacy instruction in the ELA classroom. After spending the final semester investigating the role technology plays in supporting literacy learning, one pre-service teacher expressed his dismay about leaving the program and, seemingly, being cut off from a pipeline of valuable information and resources:

I have some vague idea that there are a lot of really good resources out there, but I just have no idea of, like, how to connect with them. And even after this class, you know, I don't know how I'm going to be able to connect…to find other resources…. I just don't know. It'd be nice to get a newsletter or something, you know, that says, like, 'You should check this out,' or something like that.

Those words—a pre-service teacher bemoaning his uncertainty about how he will connect with others and continue his professional learning post-graduation—have fueled our interests in preparing pre-service teachers to engage in their own self-directed professional learning. This chapter presents research investigating pre-service secondary English teachers' perceptions regarding their experiences engaging in networked learning during a teaching internship.

BACKGROUND

Integrating online technologies in the ELA classroom to support student learning has received extensive coverage (e.g., Hicks, 2009; Kajder, 2003; Rozema & Webb, 2008). Accordingly, much attention has also been paid to how teacher educators prepare pre-service English teachers to incorporate the latest technologies into their practice (e.g., Grabill & Hicks, 2005; Pope & Golub, 2000; Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005; Young & Bush, 2004). However, it seems that secondary students are not the only ones whose learning can benefit from the active use of online technologies. Given recent endorsements for the potential of social media—defined for our purposes as interactive online technologies used to make connections with others for the purposes of sharing and receiving ideas and other information—to extend teachers' professional learning (e.g., Boss, 2008; Couros, 2008; Demski, 2010; Jakes, 2007; Trinkle, 2009), it seems that

attention must also be paid to how pre-service English teachers are taught to harness the latest online technologies in order to connect with professionals in the field, to engage in discourse about ideas and theories that are shaping their practice, and to locate and share resources of value in the ELA classroom. In other words, attention must be paid to how pre-service teachers are prepared to partake in "networked learning" (Steeples & Jones, 2002, p. 2).

The powerful learning that takes place for individuals plugged into a social network of teachers who collaborate, share inquiries into their own and others' practice, and engage in thoughtful professional discourse face-to-face as described by Cercone (2009) may be enhanced with the use of social media. Such technologies allow learners to extend the reach of their networks beyond the local geographic area to include professionals with shared interests and practices from across the globe. Networked learning empowers learners to diversify their influences and gain perspectives that would likely be unattainable otherwise. Steeples and Jones (2002) describe networked learning as "learning in which information and communication technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources" (p. 2). Utilizing social media tools to support networked learning affords teachers opportunities to engage with others in collaborative spaces where they can reflect on their practice, share knowledge, and develop fresh understandings about teaching and learning (Riel & Fulton, 2001). Such technologies are characterized by the ability to bring individuals together to share insights, to make connections where there were none before, and to enhance the learning experience for all parties, making them viable options for teachers, both in-service and pre-service, to carry out self-directed professional learning.

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