Chapter 13

An Analysis of Teacher Knowledge and Emotional Sharing in a Teacher Blog Community

Jung Won Hur
Auburn University, USA

Thomas Brush
Indiana University, USA

Curt Bonk
Indiana University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of a research study analyzing knowledge and emotional sharing in a self-generated online teacher community. Although active informal learning occurs in online communities of teachers, scant information is available about the knowledge and emotions teachers share in these communities. The authors conducted a content analysis of 1,709 entries in a self-generated blog community and examined the types of activities teachers were engaged in. The data revealed that over 29% of entries were related to lesson plans or teaching resources. In addition, over 17% of the postings addressed teachers' positive or negative emotions. The authors argue that teacher participation in online communities should be promoted and encouraged since online communities help teachers with informal learning and emotional sharing.

INTRODUCTION

Diverse student demographics and expectations of high test scores require teachers to continue to develop their knowledge and skills through Teacher Professional Development (TPD). Hill (2007) reports that most US teachers are required to complete an average 120 hours of training every five years. At the same time, No Child Left Behind mandates a minimum of 25% of educational technology grants to be allocated for high quality teacher professional development. However, despite this emphasis, researchers report that many TPD programs have little impact on teacher knowledge and skill development (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Guskey, 1986; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Programs are largely developed based on knowledge transmission from experts (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). In such a model, teachers are asked to be passive listeners, consuming knowledge created by outside experts who often have little knowledge about local conditions (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011; Wilson & Berne, 1999). The learning focus is mainly on mastering teaching skills and basic rules (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). More importantly, teacher training is often provided separately from actual classes, such as during summer workshops. Unfortunately, in such situations, teachers have minimal, if any, opportunity to get feedback on the ideas learned and possible applications for the classroom with the experts who ran the workshop or institute when they attempt to place the skills learned into practice. Worse still, they often lack time to discuss their ideas even with fellow teachers in their own building or district (Fiszer, 2004; Hew & Hara, 2007).

Internet technology, however, has provided teachers with a new learning opportunity; teachers have created online communities to share ideas and concerns with peers (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hew & Hara, 2007; Hur & Brush, 2009).

For example, Trinnifer, a middle school language arts teacher, asked members in a self-generated online community of teachers for practical ideas: "How do you differentiate for a class of widely varying abilities without drawing attention to any one student or set of students?" (Retrieved from Teaching community in LiveJournal on 2008, February 10). Increasing diversity in a classroom requires adept teaching abilities. Many teachers, like Trinnifer, search for such new skills and knowledge in online communities.

Online communities are "a collaborative means of achieving 'shared creation' and 'shared understanding,' in which mutual exchange between community members are encouraged to support individual and collective learning" (Yeh, 2010, p. 140). They are self-organizing and self-sustaining entities that entail a common practice and a joint enterprise (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2002; Schlager & Fusco, 2003). Social network technologies, such as Internet forums or blogs, are used for community development, and many teachers actively participate in these communities, sharing ideas, advice, and concerns (Hew & Hara, 2007; Hur & Brush, 2009). For example, Hur and Hara (2007) report that, since 2000, over 87,000 elementary school teachers in Korea have shared knowledge and resources through a teacher-generated Web-based community called Indischool.

Studies indicate that knowledge sharing is one of key reasons why teachers want to participate in online communities. For example, Hur and Brush (2009) found that teachers voluntarily took part in online communities because sharing online allowed teachers to explore a variety of new ideas and reflect on their own teaching practice. Similarly, Hew and Hara (2007) found that teachers wanted to share knowledge in online communities to improve their own skills while discussing with others. A teacher in Hew and Hara's study discussed, "When I share my knowledge, I usually get comments from other people, and we go back and forth in our discussions. It makes me think,

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