Exploring Moroccan EFL Teachers’ Experiences with Facebook Groups as Forms of Informal Professional Development

Abstract

In the educational field, research has shown that teacher quality and leadership are key to school effectiveness. Hence, continuing professional development for teachers is essential in helping them remain current and relevant in their practice in order to address changing and emergent needs in educating the next generation. That entails the adoption of new innovative models which encourage interaction, collaboration and flexibility among teachers and educators. Hence, The richness of the online experience makes online teacher communities developed in differen facebook groups, due to their availability and the activities and interactions they afford, present a viable means for creating authentic growth opportunities, and self-sustaining change for teachers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes and practices of EFL teachers using Social Netword Sites- mainly Facebook- for their continuing professional learning in the Moroccan context. An online survey was distributed among teacher users of various teacher facebook group to further explore their experiences with this Social Network Site as a form of an online professional development and the impact of the teachers’ interactions on their professional growth. The data gathered revealed that most teacher respondents have had a fruitful experience that benefited their personal and professional growth through the active collaborations and interactions those networks offer among their users.

Keywords: EFL Teacher, Perceptions, Professional Development, Virtual Community, Facebook groups, Interaction

Communities of practice are supported by social constructivism and experiential learning theory

The purpose is to explore how the interaction within those communities impact the professional development of teachers using the constructivist theory of learning as the conceptual framework

Virtual communities echo Vygotsky’s (1978) argument that a person’s learning may be enhanced through engagement with others which enables the extension of that person’s capability to a new, higher level.

More experienced participants pass on to the novice the knowledge and sills they have acquired

The shared expertise and learning of all participants is enhanced

Members of virtual communities share resources (experiences, problems, solutions, tools, methodologies, information, insight, and advice) which provide assets in the form of collective knowledge “knowledge building community”

**What is a virtual community?**

A group of people with common interests and practices that communicates through an online platform to share and construct knowledge in a particular domain (Wenger et al, 2005)

**What is collaborative learning?**

It is an educational approach t teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product (Richards & Schmidt, 2013)

Introduction

The field of language teaching is subject to rapid changes both as the progression responds to new educational reforms and trends and as schools face new challenges as a result of changes in various components such as curriculum, national tests and teachers’ and learners’ needs.

Since in each educational institution or school there are teachers with different experiences, interests, knowledge and skills, it is essential to have a community that has mutual sharing of knowledge and experience and a valuable source of professional growth. It is argued that despite the astronomical amounts of money invested in continuous teacher learning, the impact on teacher has not been identified since most Continuing Professional Development models (hereafter CPD) do not take into account the individual needs, and the workplace of teachers since it has complex components such as the curriculum, pupils. Hence, Communities of Practice (hereafter CoPs) particularly virtual communities have become the new trend that is claimed to be an effective alternative for traditional professional development models-conferences, demo lessons, one day workshops...etc. Hence, A virtual Community of Practice (CoP) is a network of individuals who share a domain of interest about which they communicate online. The practitioners share resources (for example experiences, problems and solutions, tools, methodologies). its main aim is to enhance the knowledge of participants within the community, via formal education or professional development. Virtual learning communities could have learning as their main goal or the online learning could be generated as a side effect. Online CoPs are becoming widespread among educators thanks to technological developments which enable increased communication, interactivity among participants and incorporation of collaborative pedagogical models, specifically through information communications technologies (ICTs) They afford the potential for the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication, access to -and from- geographically isolated communities and international information sharing. Social media and social networking sites are progressively gaining attention in relation to professional development and life-long learning for school and academic teachers and staff. In the literature we now find studies examining social media and social network sites as a means for teachers’ professional learning and knowledge-sharing (e.g., Al-Oqily, Alkhatib, Al-Khasawneh, & Alian, 2013; Bissessar, 2014; Borba & Llinares, 2012; Hew & Hara, 2007; Liljekvist, 2014; Manca & Ranieri, 2014; Pepin, Gueudet & Trouche, 2013; Rutherford, 2010; van Bommel & Liljekvist, 2015).

Background

It has been widely recognized that although those CPD opportunities might be useful for teachers to get the latest knowledge, it does not take into consideration individuals’ needs and does not help in authentic teaching as it goes with the notion of « one size fits all ».

The implementation of virtual communities as a professional development practice that uses collaborative interaction within a constructivist framework is said to be an effective way to promote teacher learning;

It is accepted globally that teacher growth does not occur in isolation. Contemporary professional development seeks to construct communities in which participants engage in thoughtful activities bu collaborating with peers to construct knowledge that pertains to teaching and learning

Since in each educational institution, there are teachers with different levels of experience, knowledge and skills, it is important to have a community that has mutual sharing of knowledge and experience and a valuable source of professional growth.  
  
This traditional educational method is not always the most suitable for all types of learning and especially not suitable for every professional, because professionals tend to be very busy people, have their families, their travels, their lives full of other priorities. So, a method of professional development will only be efficient when it is as adaptive, and personalised as possible. Another factor to mention is that the volume of new knowledge produced worldwide in a profession is so enormous nowadays that the traditional role of the ‘teacher as a knowledge source’, doesn’t work in these highly specialised areas anymore. Before a teacher or trainer is fully educated, the knowledge has already changed.  
  
  
  
  
Due in large part to the whole school reform efforts at teacher collegiality and collaboration, schools became professional communities of practice, where teachers worked together to determine what did and what did not work in teaching and learning. Teacher interactions in staff development learned from experts why classroom practices did or did not work. During professional development, teachers worked independently or collaboratively to determine what could be adopted to classroom practice. Teachers learning what did and did not work in a community of professional practice became known as a professional learning community .  
  
A PLC may be defined as educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve . The goal of teacher work in PLCs is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit . ""The use of PLCs is the best, least expensive, most professionally rewarding way to improve schools.  
  
DuFour claims  
  
Kruse, Louise & Bryk believe professional learning communities are focused upon the cultivation of learning and the interactions of teachers and administrators who seek to improve learning outcomes. According to Shulman and Shulman , teacher development, which occurs within the context of learning communities, enables teachers to become learners and encourages them to create a new environment that cultivates a common vision and the capacity to be reflective about learning processes and practices. Roberts and Pruitt believe professional development that occurs within the natural setting provides to educators an opportunity that encourages them to visit one another’s classrooms, meet frequently, discuss issues, and share information and insights pertaining to students. , contend schools can only transform into professional communities when the educators working within them are required to change many things, including themselves .  
  
Each of us sets our own priorities in terms of student outcomes. For example, one teacher might emphasize students knowing all the facts and operational skills. Another might think that what’s most important is to develop a love of learning in students. Still another teacher might want to develop students to be better critical thinkers and problem solvers, and they’re not as concerned about students memorizing the facts.  
  
A good teacher needs to help students develop all of those things, but it’s easy to get stuck in your own ideology if you are working alone. A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance. Conversely, it denotes professional learning, within the context of a cohesive group, which focuses on collective knowledge and occurs within ethical parameters that promote interpersonal caring and permeation of the lives of the entire school community .