

Building Connections: Professional Online Presence and Learning Networks

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The focus of this paper is on social media in teacher education in relation to the use of social media for building a professional online presence and learning network. This paper relates experience and insights drawn from my own work as a teacher educator experimenting with social media, and presents a discussion of tertiary teaching practice, ethnographic research in progress and innovation in action. In the context of teacher education, the question posed is: How might social media support professional learning?

Recent reports suggest that social media is used in teacher education for sharing content, discussing and collaborating. There are, however, challenges and risks with social media in an academic context. These are explored, along with implications for student learning, professional expectations, policy, research and practice in teacher education. Specific practical illustrations are provided, drawing upon work across several blended teacher education programmes in New Zealand, relating experiences when starting out with social media, integrating coursework challenges for student teachers, and considering feedback and future planning. Finally, issues and challenges are summed up, highlighting attitudes, learning orientations and safety.

Teacher education, social media, professional online presence, learning networks

1. Introduction

A teacher education student in my class of 2014 wrote, "I plan to have an open-mindset towards learning in new environments because I want to be a teacher who guides my students to do the same" (Zoey, 2014, personal communication).

Zoey wrote this statement while reflecting on our social media challenge, entitled 'Professional Online Presence and Learning Networks' or POPLN, within our teacher education course. Like Zoey, I want to be a teacher (-educator) who inspires and encourages colleagues to use social media for building connections and for ongoing learning as professionals.

2014 was a big year for social media in higher education, with the advent of the first European Conference on Social Media as well as the release of the Higher Education edition of the Horizon Report (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada & Freeman, 2014), highlighting the growing ubiquity of social media as a fast trend. In the southern hemisphere, other influential pieces of research included Lupton's (2014) Australian report on academics' work-related use of social media.

According to the New Media Consortium (Johnson et al, 2014), 40% of the world's population are regular users of social media, including educators and students across all ages and demographics. In New Zealand, four out of five people with an internet connection have a social media account (Crothers, Gibson, Smith, Bell & Miller, 2014). As this statistic grows, so does the proportion of academics engaging with social media as a regular professional pursuit. The trend is for increasing uptake of tools and platforms like Twitter, Blogging, and other digital media across professional contexts and for teaching purposes (Lupton, 2014; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013, cited by Johnson et al, 2014; Selwyn, 2011).

In teacher education, leveraging the power of social media for social learning is increasingly recognized as a key skill for teachers (Johnson et al, 2014). Of course, this is more a set of dispositions, competencies and literacies than a skill as such. This paper illuminates some of the finer points regarding leverage of social media for professional

learning in teacher education. As teacher educators gradually immerse themselves in the possibilities, teacher education students are also beginning to explore educative potential. For example, a New Zealand study by Wright (2010) explored how twitter could help teacher education students to develop reflective practices while on teaching practicum placements in schools.

In teacher education, uses of social media include the production and sharing of content, discussion and interaction with content, and collaborative connection with other social media users (Johnson et al, 2014). Each of these uses is briefly discussed in turn.

Firstly, the production and sharing of content occurs where users are encouraged to use social media to both understand and communicate ideas (Gesser, 2013), promoting openness and sharing of information for example by making research and resources available outside of the academy (Chayko, 2014; Lupton, 2014, McCarty, 2010). Twitter, in particular, is useful for such purposes in conjunction with blogging, due to the ease of sharing conference insights for others to follow (Lupton, 2014). It is rare now to attend a conference in teacher education without a corresponding twitter hashtag and a series of interest groups emerging. In a similar vein, social media can function as a 'backchannel' for communication within or between classes, so that students and teachers continue to share alongside formal channels (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012).

Secondly, discussion and interaction with content can be asynchronous or in real time, enabling collective thinking (Johnson et al, 2014), engagement in social commentary (Lupton, 2014), and ultimately knowledge construction via networking (Selwyn, 2011).

Thirdly, collaborative connections with other users are possible as social media can enable collaboration across institutions and with field experts (Johnson et al, 2014). The potential for collective work is widened due to the public nature of many networks, creating opportunities to interact with and learn from individuals who may not easily meet in person (Couros & Jarrett, 2012). Importantly, networks enable questions to be promptly answered (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). For some, social media is about building relationships (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012; McCarty, 2010; Nolan, 2013), giving and receiving support (Lupton, 2014), and mitigating feelings of isolation (Wright, 2010).

In these ways, social media can be employed as a backchannel, an ongoing discussion and a personal learning network. Overall, social media can enable teacher education participants to be "connected, collective and creative", as Selwyn (2011) suggests. However, as is always the case with digital technologies, the affordances are not necessarily realized and learning is by no means guaranteed. After all, not all uses of social media are educational or of sufficient quality to contribute to knowledge building.

Stumbling blocks and issues with social media include the time consuming nature of establishing and maintaining social media contacts (Lupton, 2014; Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). For many educators, there are concerns about separating public and private life, and a wish to preserve privacy (Lupton, 2014; Johnson et al, 2014). Similarly, there is uncertainty about the boundaries between personal and professional use of social media (Lupton, 2014), which can easily become indistinct. Academics are troubled by issues around online safety and security (Johnson et al, 2014), including fear of becoming a target of attack (Lupton, 2014). A complex set of concerns revolve around integrity in terms of the risk of offending one's audience, while academics may also be at pains to be taken seriously by colleagues who might regard social media as inappropriate or trivial (Lupton, 2014). There is also a fear of losing control over intellectual property. These uncertainties and fears are exacerbated in many cases by a lack of clear policy structures around the use of social media in academic contexts (Johnson et al, 2014). As a result, teacher educators and students alike can be reluctant to use social media for educational purposes, and may confine their use to private and recreational functions

(Selwyn, 2011). While resistance may be due to a lack of awareness of the educative affordances of social media, it can also be a deliberate choice in order to avoid the pitfalls mentioned, and it cannot be assumed that students or staff will necessarily extend their use of social media in ways that are supportive of learning and teaching.

Looking to the future, there are implications for student learning, professional expectations, policy, research and practice in teacher education. Social media mirrors real-life learning, now and in the future. It is essential that students learn to manage social media processes for the sake of lifelong learning, since “Students will need to participate in these learning networks to stay on top of their fields of interest and to advance their careers” (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011, p. 135). For these reasons, educators need to lead by modeling transparency, network literacy, sharing and participation. Increasingly, these functions are a professional expectation (Nolan, 2013).

Professionals in the 21st Century use social media to promote their professional selves, and to network in pursuit of lifelong learning and professional development. It therefore stands to reason that professional preparation should incorporate use of social media for professional online presence and learning networks.

In terms of policy, the Horizon Report identified a need for guidelines on the safe and effective use of social media (Johnson et al, 2014). Fortunately, the New Zealand Teachers Council and the Post Primary Teachers’ Association have each established guidelines, advice for teachers, and communities for discussion of key issues relating to social media. The professional resources are available and can be utilized in teacher education. Other parameters are established at an institutional level, and our university has a social media policy for staff. The guidelines and policy directions will need to be dynamic and up-to-date with current thinking, practices and risks, but we are not starting from scratch in this respect.

To further research, Greenhow and Gleason (2012) highlight the importance of looking at participant perspectives on social media experiences, and call for studies of teachers’ purposes for social media integration. Davis et al (2012) suggest there is a need to look at less traditional students, distance students and those who are older and more isolated from campus community. In these regards, I have reflected upon my uses of social media in teacher education, considering the purposes and student feedback and responses. I am fortunately positioned to do so as the courses I teach are online degrees in teacher education, where students are mature adults and geographically dispersed.

Finally, in terms of practice, as a teacher educator it is my professional responsibility to challenge teachers to adapt and optimize the learning opportunities afforded by social media.

2. POPLN: Professional Online Presence and Learning Networks

Fundamentally, a key premise of this paper is that teacher educators must look to make professional use of social media, before turning their attention to social media for student learning. In essence, this paper highlights two aspects of social media in teacher education: Professional online presence and Learning networks.

The first element, Professional online presence, involves cultivation of a social media profile and footprint that is in keeping with one’s goals as an educator. This involves ethical behaviour and formation of a professional identity. For example, in relation to social media behaviour, it is vital that educators are mindful of netiquette and “visible in

positive ways” (Nussbaum-Beach & Hall, 2012, p.89), carefully managing online reputation. In terms of teaching practice, social media is an avenue for continuing and expanding beyond the walls of the classroom or Learning Management System (Gesser, 2013). In this day and age, “Connected educators google well” (Nussbaum-Beach & Hall, 2012, p.88), and it is readily apparent which professionals have harnessed the power of social media for teaching and learning. Professional online presence is after all, a deliberate stance, and one that is intelligently cultivated in the service of educational endeavour.

Secondly, Learning networks are an opportunity to join and sustain a community of professionals, to engage in adaptive help seeking and to adopt a proactive stance in relation to professional learning. Social media affords educators the opportunity to regularly “trade information, share resources, ask and answer questions, and debate and discuss educational issues of the day” (Couros & Jarrett, 2012, p. 149).

Educators and students alike engage in adaptive help seeking when they know how and when to seek information, feedback, support and assistance, and turn to their networks as part of a cycle of self-regulated learning (Newman, 2002; Steed & Poskitt, 2010). Via connected learning communities, educators and students can become “do-it-yourself” learners, selecting mentors and orchestrating their own learning (Nussbaum-Beach & Hall, 2012, p.11). As I argued in a recent blog post (Author, 2014), teachers need to take control of professional learning, looking beyond pre-packaged courses provided by others. It is often said that effective teachers must be learners, and it stands to reason that effective learners are self-directed and entrusted with choices and control over personalized programmes of learning. As suggested by Zoey (2014) earlier, effective teachers and learners must have an open mindset and be prepared to learn in new environments.

3. My professional context: Key experiences and discoveries

I teach in several blended teacher education programmes in New Zealand, including a ground-breaking and award winning undergraduate mixed media programme (MMP); a graduate Masters of teaching and learning degree (MTL); and a refresher course for inservice teachers (TRC). Across these programmes, I have worked with student-/teachers to introduce and extend the use of social media for professional purposes. Starting with Twitter, and branching out to Facebook, Pinterest, Blogs and ePortfolios, students have connected and reflected, meeting in real time, sharing and reviewing resources, tracking news and engaging with the wider profession. I’d like to share some of the processes involved and feedback received, as well as ideas for the future.

3.1 Starting out with professional use of social media

I joined Twitter in May 2009 at the suggestion of my colleague, Noeline Wright, who was experimenting with tweeting as a reflective and connective exercise in teacher education (Wright, 2010). I started by following a few local educators, branched out to International figures, and gradually learned to tweet in conjunction with attendance at conferences. In 2011 I encouraged students to follow me and to embark on their own twitter journey, and in 2013 I established a social media challenge for my class in teacher education:

I challenge you to take steps this semester to enhance your professional presence online.

You can choose how to approach this, as there are many options.

Three of these options are:

1. Establish a new, professional, social-networking presence - e.g., via Twitter or LinkedIn
2. Establish a blog about an aspect of teaching/learning that interests you
3. Establish a teaching portfolio in Mahara - myportfolio.school.nz

If you have other ideas and tools to explore, please share these here and go right ahead with your plans.

As the semester goes on, I would like you to share your progress with this challenge in the forum established for this purpose.

So, how will YOU respond to the challenge?

The social media challenge was tremendously successful, popular and a revelation to all of us!

Teacher education students established Twitter accounts, started following teachers and educational authorities, and joined communities of professionals to discuss educational issues (e.g., #edchatnz, @TeachHub). Students often lurked in twitter, following and reading, before gradually beginning to retweet and to post links to teaching resources. The most confident students seemed to be influenced at an early stage by a particular hashtag, group or individual. For example, one student discussed the social media challenge in person with his school leader and was inspired to follow the senior colleague and to build his network from that point. Twitter was a popular choice, branching out from Facebook which was generally already a social favourite for the students. A few tentatively established blogs, struggling with uncertainty about 'what to blog' but gradually finding their voices. Some established eportfolios and shared these for feedback. Students critiqued the usability of the social media tools and exchanged advice on how to overcome hurdles relating to confidence and technicalities (who to follow, what to post, how to add a tab to the eportfolio). As the semester progressed, students persevered and followed a wider range of international educators, read more widely in the blogosphere, and independently located then shared online resources like tutorials. Pinterest and Scoopit entered the range of possibilities. We set up a class hashtag. Those who identified a specialist interest to blog about were able to sustain their blogging adventures.

Student feedback from the class of 2013 indicated a wish to formalize the social media challenge in some way, via summative assessment for course credit, and closer integration with the assigned work in the course. Students valued the activity but found it time consuming, and wanted license to spend more study time on the social media challenge.

3.2 POPLN 2014

In response to the success of the social media challenge in 2013 and student feedback and suggestions relating to the development of the task, a more comprehensive approach was trialed in 2014, entitled 'Professional online presence and learning networks' or the POPLN challenge.

To initiate POPLN, I provided students with background reading about professional uses of social media in education. These included media reports highlighting the dangers of social media for teachers who have faced disciplinary action for transgressions; the aforementioned guidelines from the PPTA and Teachers Council; and a range of examples of social media tools along with explanatory YouTube clips, tutorials, and professional users in education.

Students were prompted to consider the following:

- Cybersafety: Your online identity and how to safeguard your professional reputation, integrity and privacy;
- Being proactive: Establishing a professional online presence;
- Lifelong learning: Using the Internet to build a personal/professional learning network;

- Challenges: Expanding your repertoire of social networking tools for professional purposes

With these considerations and goals in mind, the essence of the POPLN challenge directed students to:

Select a tool to begin with, any free online social networking tool will do.

- find the tool online
- establish a profile
- explore the uses for professional networking and learning
- find out how others use it
- reflect on the potential for future learning and help seeking
- share some of your thoughts in our Moodle forum
- respond to peers in our Moodle forum

In response to students' preference for the task to be more integral to the assigned work, the 2014 class were required to write a proposal and interim progress report within the first month of semester, outlining choice of tool/s and intentions in cultivating a professional online presence and learning network. Students were encouraged to share postings, quoting evidence of their own social media presence, and self evaluating their learning to date.

Mid-course, students were required to participate in a forum in which they shared a learning experience connected with the POPLN challenge, and exchanged advice on how to optimise the learning potential of the available social media tools.

At the end of semester, students were required to produce a final report, reflecting on their journey with POPLN and use of social media tools, and incorporating critical analysis of the affordances and limitations of their chosen tool for learning and professional networking. At this stage, students were also prompted to set goals for ongoing professional learning through social media.

Alongside these assigned coursework elements, an optional asynchronous forum remained open for the duration of the semester so that students could discuss POPLN progress, issues, share developments and ask questions. In addition, a class hashtag was again established, but this time a Twitter widget was embedded in the Moodle course to enable students to track the class tweets within the course.

Throughout the POPLN challenge, students used the progress forum to pose questions, share links and signal their own presence (e.g., by posting their twitter handles or links to new blog posts). Students exchanged feedback, commenting on each others' efforts and reports of progress, encouraging their peers. Common challenges articulated by the students during the challenge included feeling exposed and vulnerable at the start, so that the first tweet was a hurdle. Moving beyond lurking in twitter took the students through a progression that typically involved retweeting before posting original links and commentary. After taking the first steps, the next challenge involved maintaining momentum and sustaining purposeful patterns of contribution. Learning to use hashtags was cited as a challenge for some students, along with the struggle to become familiar with strange terminology like "handle" (Twitter) and "pins" (Pinterest). A common concern was dealing with overload, due to the vast array of social media options and the volume of postings, pins and tweets involved. Some of the students reported overload stemming from managing multiple social media accounts. In the realm of professional blogging, copyright became a concern for one student who wanted to use images from a children's book on her blog. This initiated an authentic inquiry for the student involved, as she

looked into the protocols, identified the copyright holder, and negotiated permissions. Another key breakthrough in learning terms came as students became discerning about who to follow, and importantly determined who NOT to follow on social media, in terms of corporate entities and individual commentators who detracted from the professional focus of learning as a student teacher. Overall, students said they liked the open ended style of POPLN and the choice involved in the design of the challenge, selecting their own tools and setting their own goals for social media use. In particular, students reported enjoyment in connecting with each other and with a wider 'community of practice'.

As Cameron reflected,

The main benefit for me has been extending my community of practice beyond the colleagues of my own school. To be able to follow and communicate with teachers and educational organizations with similar class levels, curriculum foci, interests and concerns enriches and supports one's own practice, but there is also an array of new initiatives, perspectives and research that I might never have known about in my very familiar and comfortable small town, small school bubble. I look forward to continuing to build my connections through the rest of my study and back into the classroom.

3.3 Feedback and future planning

Subsequent to the 2014 POPLN challenge, I have continued my own adventures in social media, extending the use of Twitter to provide a hashtag for each class, and engaging in synchronous 'tweetmeets' with new classes to discuss coursework. We have experimented with Tweepchat and Storify to collate and manage our conversations. New cohorts of students have engaged and responded to the POPLN challenge, and have diversified to experiment further with visual tools like Pinterest. As Angela reflected in relation to Pinterest,

It has been a great tool to collect resources related to teaching. For example, I have been interested in modern learning environments so using Pinterest, I was able to find images that helped me gain an understanding and insight to what this might look like.

In the meantime, students' use of Twitter evolved and became more sophisticated, as articulated by Josie, who discerned several dimensions to her use of the tool,

Twitter has opened up professional learning possibilities in many ways. Firstly, through 'following' specific education-based individuals as well as organizations, I have been able to stay updated regarding movements relating to educational policy and research through the comments or 'posts' others have made through Twitter. I have also found this medium useful with regard to resources. There are many organizations that actively use Twitter to share their great ideas for classroom activities, and positive experiences they have had using particular resources. CORE Education and the Science Learning Hub are examples of some Twitter users who post tips for their followers to use. Another dimension of awareness I have encountered through the use of social media is the ability, when actively looking, to stay updated about the latest and greatest in terms of educational opportunities. There have been summits, conferences and professional learning sessions which have been 'tweeted' about, and I have come to know about these events solely through reading Twitter. I have visited many websites and blog pages as a direct result of tweets that I have read. Being connected in this way has brought me to academic readings, topical debates and page after page of classroom activity sites.

Students still reported that their biggest challenge was finding the confidence to post. Surmounting this hurdle was also the most significant breakthrough, and with it came the realisation of the power of social media for collaboration and discovery.

As Angela related,

My breakthrough moment would definitely have to be joining the 'What is School' educational chat. I was able to connect with educators from around the world for one hour to discuss educational technology. It was a great experience that allowed me to gain insight on the perspectives of other educators and discuss issues and strategies with using technology in the classroom. For example, during the 'what is school' chat one person stated that, "Closed minds are the biggest roadblock. Just seeing tech and not the possibilities" (Drager, 2014) and in regards to strategies, Lang (2014) shared, "Technology should be used as a transformational tool for innovation and creativity, not an add-on." A common theme was that technology should be used to enhance collaboration, discovery, and a sense of empowerment.

4. Issues and challenges

As I look back on my experiences with social media and POPLN in 2013-14, I can identify a number of issues and challenges, briefly summarized next.

4.1 Skepticism and dismissal

Teacher education encourages critical thinking, questioning and reflective practice. However, when faced with social media, educators sometimes respond with the kind of skepticism that detracts from open-mindedness. I have faced incredulity from senior educators, elearning enthusiasts, and teacher education students. This reflects the lack of credibility cited as a concern by Lupton's (2014) academics. Furthermore, as Selwyn (2011) suggests, not all students will readily leap at the chance to use social media in an educational and professional context.

Professional commentary and the track record explored with students is persuasive. There remains, nevertheless, a need to generate data on the effects of POPLN after students graduate as teachers and to that end, I am planning a longitudinal study and will be following up with the cohorts of 2013-2014 to ascertain whether and how they continue professional learning through social media.

4.2 Teachers as learners

Teachers (including student teachers) are often looking for ideas that are directly applicable to their own classrooms and students – they want immediate practical application. Sometimes, teachers leap ahead to try things out with students before they have invested in their own professional learning. It has been a challenge to have teachers take a step back and to put their own learning first. For example, after an initial introduction to POPLN, student teachers have asked, 'how can I implement this as a primary teacher?' and 'I can't wait to use social media with my students but how will the school react?'

I caution student teachers not to rush to use social media with students, but instead to take time to try out the tools and social media environment, for professional learning, in order to become more familiar with the risks and possibilities. This is not to suggest that POPLN is irrelevant to the classroom, since after all, teachers as learners will gain many ideas via social media that can and do have immediate classroom application. At the same time, professional learning through social media enables insight into issues of privacy, copyright, netiquette, time management, and digital literacy, all of which inform teaching practice.

4.3 Safety, privacy and integrity

There are so many horror stories about mismanagement of online identity and loss of professional integrity due to over sharing. A professor recently remarked that it is safer to stay away from the Internet as far as possible, to keep a low profile and avoid creating a digital footprint.

But to what extent is this realistic?

What do you find when you Google yourself?

Why leave management of your online identity to chance? Or to others?

5. Future research

A cross-disciplinary approach will be adopted in 2015 involving case studies of social media from diverse faculties of the university, including management, education, engineering and language learning. Case studies will explore how to assist tertiary students to establish an online reputation that is compatible with and supportive of professional identity. Additionally, a further aim is to enable students to develop a network for connected professional learning, where online mentoring can take place.

In each case, the intention is that the professional online presence and learning networks will grow during tertiary study and be carried forward and sustained as graduates join the workforce. A team of researchers will work collaboratively to develop and report on case studies, which are expected to inform wider university policy and practice.

In conclusion, this paper has chronicled some of my experiences with social media in teacher education during the past couple of years. I have worked to establish a professional online presence and learning network, and have led the teacher education students in my classes to do likewise, by exploring tools, sharing resources, and building wider community connections through discussion. This paper has suggested practical approaches to integrating social media teacher education as a series of coursework tasks. While there are challenges related to attitudes, learning dispositions, and safety risks, the highlights are significant. Not least among these is the importance of disrupting assumptions, opening minds, and raising awareness of new possibilities with social media in teacher education.

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