

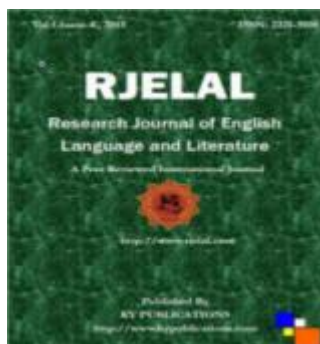
REVIEW ARTICLE



SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH: A HUB FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Social media have brought in a sea change in the way people connect and share experience. It has facilitated new ways of sharing knowledge, be it humble original ideas or grand scientific explorations. More and more professionals availing the services offered by social media has paved the emergence of virtual groups and forums of people sharing common professional affiliations or interests. This digital networking through social media provides a convenient and active platform for professional development of people working in different domains of knowledge. They provide a channel to communicate, share, reflect, debate, justify or to simply bond with the fraternity. Interactions that emerge in the social media constantly help one review and preview one's knowledge and practice. The present paper aims to highlight the potential of social networking sites as a platform for peer networking and professional development of teachers of English.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Digital Networking, Professional Development, Peer Networking

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social networking in late 1990s and its subsequent popularity has helped educators "foster interaction, collaboration and contribution" (Gunawardena et al., 2009) in learning. Teacher training and teacher education programmes cannot transform into classroom practice without continuous, sustained and self motivated efforts of the teachers and collaborative peer support. Professional networking through social media is one of the ways that can launch and sustain a self

initiated, self motivated and collaborative approach to learning and development for teachers. It is imperative that people coming into the teaching profession experience learning in a liberating way and social media can lend a hand in its realisation. It can make the teachers independent and feel empowered to take ownership of their learning. Increasing number of online communities of teachers on social networking platforms like Ning, Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook devoted to the

development of teachers of English bears a strong testimony to this phenomenon.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social media can be defined as a confluence of different online platforms and tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, and to interact with others. It can simply refer to the “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking” (Oxford Dictionaries). Social media includes social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, internet forums, chat rooms and message boards where people meet and discuss topics of interest, video and photo sharing sites like YouTube, Flickr and Vimeo, blogs, wikis, and social book marking. The common platforms in the social networks have become hubs where people can express and share ideas and experiences with the world. The present discussion will limit itself to the use of the social networking site Facebook for professional development of English teachers. It will explore the potential inherent in Facebook as a hot spot for professional development.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS: HOW AND WHY?

Traditionally, teachers have worked in isolation for their professional development. There were fewer avenues and little motivation for teachers to reflect on their practice, share successful practices or to connect and learn from/with peers from the same profession. However, accessible opportunities and effective collaboration for sharing, feedback and assistance are essential prerequisites for improved professional practices and a dynamic and progressive teaching-learning environment. This necessitates a platform, a place where teachers operating at different context can assemble and discuss issues of relevance. Facilitating this pressing requirement, social networking has emerged as a dynamic platform for professional development of teachers. Teachers and other educators can effectively use social media to aid their own professional development. Facebook is one of the popular social networking sites which with its multiple features can definitely aid in effective peer networking and collaboration. One can create an account on Facebook in no time and it is free. Once

an account is created, apart from usual social networking, teachers can avail different learning opportunities. They can follow different pages that are dedicated to teaching and learning of English and gain access to a host of ideas and resources such as video clips, web links, discussion threads etc. Another significant feature of Facebook is the provision for creating groups whereby like-minded individuals or people sharing special interests (e.g. English language teachers) can have the privilege to inform, share, and discuss issues exclusively relevant to them. Active participation in such groups can go a long way in creating a sustainable environment for the professional development of teachers. Thus, teachers can use social media in a variety of ways to improve their teaching-learning processes and avail multiple benefits for continuing professional development (McCulloch et al., 2011; Menon, 2013). Some of the key benefits include:

(i) Peer Networking:

An emerging body of literature supports the idea that peer networks, both within and across schools, can improve teaching and learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Social networking sites allow teachers adequate time to learn about and share effective practices. Though there is a need to establish and build rapport among the group members to discuss challenges openly and honestly, it cannot be denied that such discussion often leads to improved standards of teaching-learning practices. Social media has proved to be an avenue that breaks isolation and initiates collaboration in teacher development. It allows teachers to connect with their peers operating all around the globe in order to share plans and approaches, and for support and motivation. Thus social media has opened up new ways for teachers to engage with the fraternity, and to use the insights they gain to improve the scheme of their teaching-learning context.

(2) Reflection and Sharing of Classroom Practices:

Social media provides a platform for the teachers where they can share their reflections on their classroom experience. They can share their moments of success as well as instances when they failed while practicing a novel idea or an innovative lesson plan. Here, fellow peers can encourage and motivate through appreciation of good work and

suggestion and support for improving a failed attempt. A continuation of this process will encourage many other teachers to reflect on their own practice, and to shape ideas through feedback and discussion. Reflection and the feedback that follows can greatly enhance one's teaching effectiveness. Constructive feedback can give the teachers an insight into what is actually taking place in the classroom through the eyes of an objective external observer. It can bring an array of ideas and things that one should know and practice and eventually provide the much needed impetus to continue trailblazing efforts.

(3) Knowledge Sharing:

Today is the age of sharing, collaboration and co-operation. Sharing of knowledge is as important as its creation. Research and the dissemination of its result through seminars, conferences and journals have become a common practice. Ample studies and research on teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language are available, but hardly the research findings reach the teachers. A situation where teachers constantly refer to the current research in the field to bring changes in the way they teach is rare and remains a distant utopian dream. This apparent gap between research and the teachers can be effectively bridged if snippets of the findings of these studies can be shared through social media. This will help the teachers in keeping up-to-date with current research and debates in the field. This will consequently help them to draw ideas from all around the world and challenge their own perspectives and inspire new ways of thinking. In sum, teachers will be able to access the thoughts and ideas of educational professionals across the world.

(4) Locating Learning Resources:

With the availability of resources in plenty, the process of selecting and using one becomes a herculean task. It is always convenient to use a resource recommended by someone as it comes with the additional label of being 'tried and tested'. Through professional community groups and pages teachers often share links to resources that they have practiced or used in the classroom and found useful. Thus, it helps other fellow teachers locate useful resources and subsequently use them in their classroom. Further, Subject Experts and Teacher

Educators can be invited to the groups so that they can recommend the use of resources they deem useful and thus help the teachers to locate the right or best of the resources. This process acts as a filter between the large storehouse of available resources and the teachers who are often overburdened with classes and administrative works and left with little spare time to do this filtering on their own. Moreover, there are numerous pages on Facebook that constantly upload and share resources for English language teaching, share information about seminars, conferences and webinars, upload videos of seminars, conferences and classroom sessions, initiates discussion and debates and connects with the teachers for survey studies and so on. Some of the active pages on Facebook catering to the teachers of English are listed below:

iatefl online
Cambridge India
Cambridge ELT Group
Mundus Language School
Unique Teaching Resources
Oxford University Press – ELT
Teaching English – British Council
Teach English in India - British Council
English Language Teachers' Association of India (ELTAI)
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Inc.

(5) Post Conference/Workshop/Training

Discussion:

There is clear evidence to suggest that teachers do not transfer the knowledge and skills they learn in training sessions to classroom practices without sustained follow-up discussion and peer support. (Joyce, B. R., & Showers, B., 2002) A study, echoing this message, concluded that "it is generally accepted that listening to inspiring speakers or attending one-off workshops rarely changes teacher practice sufficiently to impact on student outcomes." (Timperley et al., 2007). Training and conferences are seldom followed up with feedback and support or continued training which is very crucial to the implementation of innovative and improved classroom practices. This hints the need to initiate peer support and networking beyond the formal training set-up which can be effectively accomplished through the easily accessible social

media. Dedicated groups can be created on Facebook to continue the discussions and debate form conferences and workshops. Trainers and trainees of a particular training programme can come together and provide feedback, support and assistance in practicing the new ways of teaching-learning.

CREATING GROUPS ON FACEBOOK: SOME SUGGESTIONS

While creating groups for mediating communication between teachers for professional development there is a need to be aware of a number of crucial issues. Research on using social media for networking and professional development forward some of the following suggestions (McCulloch et al., 2011):

- Like-minded participants should be invited to take part and form a learning community within which everyone is dedicated to exploring and experimenting with new approaches and ideas;
- A common, clear and focused objective or purpose is an inevitable prerequisite for effective sharing, collaboration and outcome, such as collaborative enquiry focused on a specific aspect of practice;
- It goes without saying that the emergence of a leader is imperative for a group to succeed. So with the creation of any professional network group leaders or administrators should be brought on board because it is they who will pioneer the initiative and actively participate to encourage the professional learning community;
- Subject experts or specialists in the field should be invited so that the participants get access to external and specialist support.
- The discussions and deliberations in these virtual groups can be followed up with some face-to-face meetings, such as conferences and workshops. This will “enable teachers to consolidate their professional relationships, and experts to introduce teachers to research literature and enquiry methods and model, observe and give feedback on practice.” (McCulloch et al., 2011)

CONCLUSION

According to the summary of a chat organised by Education World in 2009, “Teachers...are increasingly using online social-networking tools to break the traditional isolation of the classroom. In formal programmes and casual after-school conversations, they are discussing ideas with colleagues, sharing experiences, and getting answers to questions.” (as cited in Menon, 2014) Social media provide a platform to the teaching fraternity which they can access at their own pace and space. Social media have unfolded a whole new world of resources, ideas and opportunities for teachers of English. Though many teachers in India have started networking with fellow teachers from different parts of India as well as the world, the use of social media for continuous learning and professional development is yet to gain adequate popularity in India. But the lamp has been lit and the teachers need to put oil and enlighten themselves as well as others.

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