

Creating “Spaces” for Professional Development: Education Organizations’ Use of Facebook

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Abstract

The affordances of the Web enable teacher collaboration and growth through learning communities within Web 2.0 environments (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009).

Through a qualitative analysis of education organization profiles and postings on Facebook, we examined ways education organizations use social networking sites as a platform to promote trends and issues in education and to promote best practices. Data represents five education organizations and analysis shows the types and frequency of information posted for their followers on Facebook. Social media have the potential to impact professional development in many fields.

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The “Social” Web incorporates Web 2.0 tools, where participants can collaborate and communicate in real time. Social networking sites (SNS) refer to those tools developed to establish and maintain connections between participants (Davies & Merchant, 2009). Many SNSs are available, but the most popular include Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn (The EBusiness MBA Guide, 2016). Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined SNSs as “Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Learning and development are social, collaborative activities (Willis, Stephens, & Matthew, 1996). Therefore, the theoretical framework for research on Web 2.0 tools includes both cognitive and social interaction perspectives. Web 2.0 technology tools transform teaching and learning within a participatory environment where users construct knowledge and build social networks for learning (Rosen & Nelson, 2008).

The use of social media has been documented across various disciplines. “Since social networking sites began allowing organizations to create profiles and become active members, organizations have started incorporating these strategies into their public relations programming” (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009, p. 102). Christ (2005) predicted that social networks would prompt public relations practitioners to rethink how they approach relationship development with their audience. Social networking sites have potential for relationship development, but the intent of this study lies with the potential

they offer educators for professional development. Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes (2009) maintain that teachers' professional scholarship and practice can be developed thorough Web 2.0 technologies, including social networks. Other research also emphasizes the affordances of the Web for supporting teacher growth through learning communities (Zhang, 2009).

At the 2009 annual conference for the Texas Association of Teacher Educators, we presented ideas about the use of social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, as tools for preservice teachers to access professional resources regarding current trends and issues in education. Data supported the use of social networks to expose preservice teachers to professional organizations and to innovations in education. Since that study, the role of social networks has changed and continues to impact education. In this subsequent study, we revisit the role of social media in education and examine educational organizations' presence on social network sites like Facebook.

Professional Development in a Web 2.0 Environment

Social networks utilize Web 2.0 technology, which enables user interaction in multiple ways. "These spaces can exploit the affordances of different media from text, to still image, to moving image, to sound, and to any combination of these" (Davies & Merchant, 2009, p. 4). These spaces engage users through features such as profile pages, messaging, group formation, and category tagging (Davies & Merchant, 2009). With more than one billion active users on Facebook (Facebook, 2015), organizations have utilized this platform to connect with online audiences. In April 2006, Facebook opened its platform to or-

Table 1
Social Media Followers from 2009-2014

Pages	# of fans in June 2009	# of fans in Oct. 2009	# of fans in Feb. 2010	# of fans (likes) in Feb. 2011	# of fans (likes) in Nov. 2014
IRA/ILA	1,104	3,239	4240	7,719	39,680
NCTM	716	1,262	2,064	6,233	31,498

ganizations, and more than 4000 organizations joined within 2 weeks (Waters, et al., 2008). Many educational organizations, with missions to improve teacher education, have developed profiles on Facebook and other social networks. For example, organizations such as the International Literacy Association (ILA) attract users through shared connections, and many educational organizations have adopted this practice. Followership grows quickly because the *friends* see the activity of followers for each organization. Internet users *like* an organization's site and follow the organization's posts. As seen in Table 1, the International Reading Association (now ILA) and the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics, two of the organizations examined in the original study, have grown significantly since 2009 and have a wide audience of followers.

The "fans" (a term used prior to 2011) and "followers" (a term used since 2011) referenced in Table 1 are not necessarily members of the official organizations.

Organizations such as the IRA and NCTM typically recruit members who pay a fee to join the organization. The organizations' communities on Facebook, however, are not limited to those who pay to join. The affordances of social media tools enable teacher collaboration and growth through learning communities within online environments (Greenhow, et al., 2009). With Facebook, the audience is fairly precise and articulated by the user (Waller, 2013), because *liking* an organization involves an intentional effort to follow posts regularly. Although members of the official organization receive other benefits and resources, Facebook users following an education organization can benefit professionally from content posted by these organizations. Social media platforms provide a means to advertise and attract official members.

Networks such as Facebook align with Gee's concept of affinity spaces. Gee's (2004) idea of affinity spaces, however, involves a *space* in which people interact, rather than a community in which people are members. According to Gee, "An affinity space is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender" (p. 67). Affinity spaces may include face-to-face meetings, message boards, blogs, websites, or any other opportunities to learn with others, with paths toward becoming a participant. Social networks are affinities that can support teachers in their own professional development, where skills are developed through collaborative debate, discussion, and activities (Waller, 2013). Gee's concept, however, does not promote the "labelling" of people participating in affinity spaces.

Literature regarding Personal Learning Networks

(PLNs) also focuses on the need for educators to build personal connections within informal learning environments, including social networking sites, where educators can connect to people and resources within a moment's notice (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). "We can literally build global, online classrooms of our own making on the web that include networks and communities of learners with whom we interact on a regular basis" (p. 2). Educators can connect across multiple platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) via multiple technology tools (computers, tablets, phones, etc.) simultaneously. Facebook is just one of many ways with which educators can connect, as technology tools allow us to connect across many platforms simultaneously. This study involves education *spaces* on Facebook to simplify the research process but also considered the complexities of these spaces.

Regardless of the label placed on Web 2.0 learning spaces, the consensus seems to be that social networks like Facebook offer the potential for professional development tools for teachers. The Hechinger Report (2012) stated, "Twitter and Facebook might soon replace traditional professional development for teachers" (para. 1). The report emphasized the importance of social media because teachers can utilize virtual connections for assistance regarding particular issues. Participation in such a network offers opportunity for growth at anytime. "Social media and its tapestry of networks, articles, videos, and other resources are also making learning more ubiquitous" and "social media has transcended its initial usage for building social connections" (New Media Consortium, 2015, p. 22). People increasingly rely on Facebook and Twitter newsfeeds for current events (New Media Consortium, 2015), so it seems

reasonable for educators to access these resources for professional learning. Education organizations have the potential to offer a means for online professional development, depending on ways they facilitate information dissemination and education connections.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate educational organizations' uses of Facebook for professional development. The interest in this project grew from a study of the use of Facebook in preparing preservice teachers to understand growing trends and issues in the field of education (Pilgrim & Bledsoe, 2011). This subsequent study revisited education organizations, particularly national and international nonprofit professional organizations supporting K-12. The research questions were

- 1) **How are educational organizations using social platforms?**
- 2) **How does social media promote education?**

Data Collection and Analysis

Five professional organizations, representing core content areas, were identified for this study and include: National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), and the International Reading Association (IRA), which became the International Literacy Association (ILA) in January 2015. The five organizations reflect a range of professional organizations whose missions are to support teachers of literacy, math, social studies, and science. The missions of the organiza-

Table 2

Organization Websites and Missions

Org.	Website	Mission
NCTM	www.nctm.org	The NCTM is the public voice of mathematics education, supporting teachers to ensure equitable mathematics learning of the highest quality for all students through vision, leadership, professional development, and research.
NCTE	www.ncte.org	The Council promotes the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language.
NSTA	www.nsta.org	To promote excellence and innovation in science teaching and learning for all.
NCSS	www.socialstudies.org	None posted
IRA/ ILA	www.literacyworldwide.org	The mission of the IRA is to promote reading by continuously advancing the quality of literacy instruction and research worldwide. (Oct. 2014) As the champion of a global community of literacy advocates, ILA empowers educators, inspires students, and encourages leaders, connecting them with one another and with the practical resources they need to spread the transformative power of literacy to every corner of the world. (May 2015)

tions were collected in order to consider ways Facebook posts aligned with organization missions (Table 2).

Data included Facebook posts from the five education organizations between October 15 and November 15, 2015. Data also documented the likes, shares, and comments from Facebook users who followed the organizational page. As of May 2015, the NCTM has 34,684 followers, NCTE has 50,369 followers, NSTA has 68,607 followers, NCSS has 5437 followers, and ILA has 46,293 followers. The organizations shared information by posting on Facebook. The initial data analysis involved categorizing the types of posts. Posts can be simple comments (text) or pictures, but the use of videos has increased with improved capabilities and speed on Facebook and digital devices. As shown in Table 3, organizations posted a variety of media, including posts that linked users to information on the main website, general text (posts), videos, articles (some of which may link to other websites), or chat “sessions.” Most posts included information that linked users back to the organization’s website or text. Even though it appears NSTA posted the most content, this is not the case. As NSTA posted photos, they often included several photos within a single post related to either a conference or a commercial item like a book. These photos were each counted, even though they represented one “post.”

The focus of this study was to explore how organizations utilize Facebook, particularly for professional development. Therefore, qualitative analysis focused on the content of the posts. Data were analyzed and categorized using a coding system, and themes were developed to reflect the types of posts the organizations had on their

Table 3
Types of Posts by Organizations

Org.	Conver- sational posts	An- nouncem ent posts	Link to arti- cles, blogs, etc.	Photo	Video	Chat	Totals and %
NCTM	3	7	13	8	0	1	32 33%
NCTE	0	4	0	2	0	1	7 7%
NSTA	0	14	1	27	0	0	42 43%
NCSS	0	5	0	0	0	0	5 5%
IRA/ ILA	3	1	6	0	0	1	11 11%
Totals	6	31	20	37	0	3	97

Facebook page. Data analysis initially occurred through a process of deductive coding using knowledge gained from previous exposure to these organizations and the types of posts found on the sites. Other themes emerged during analysis as two researchers coded simultaneously. A third researcher audited the data to justify themes. Twice, when there was disagreement, the three researchers discussed the content to reach an agreement on the classification. Through a process of collapsing and disaggregating themes, the researchers concluded with eight themes that reflect the content posted by organizations: conference/webinar, political/current events, teaching tips/professional development, teaching resources, commercial items, disciplinary content, and building community.

Findings

Almost half of the posts (45%) related to an event such as a conference, webinar, or online chat (Table 4). Some of the posts could have been double-coded because commercial items represent sales at the conference or building community with meetings at events; however, the researchers elected to code any post related to an event as conference or webinar. Many of the conference posts were pictures of the events or announcements about conference sessions. Since the data collection involved posts from October 15 to November 15, the frequency of postings is high for two of three organizations, NCTM and NSTA, which hosted conferences during the time of data collection. NCTE hosted a conference but shared fewer conference related posts.

The theme of political or current events referred to ways in which the organization advocated to affect policy related, for example, to standards or legislation. On November 13, the International Reading Association shared a link from its website (www.reading.org), which stated, “IRA has been criticized for not demonstrating enough favor for or against education policies, Common Core or otherwise. Our stance on any one particular issue does not make us who we are. The truth is simple: We are pro-educator. We are for teachers. That is our stance.” In addition to the statement, the shared article provided information for members about how IRA could be a guide through the current public debate about Common Core. This information, like much information posted by other organizations, kept organization members abreast of issues specifically related to Common Core.

Although the purpose of conferences includes pro-

Table 4
Content of Posts

Org.	Conf. or webinar	Political or current event	Teaching tips or professional development	Teaching resources	Commercial items	Disciplinary content	Building community	Other	Totals and %
NCTM	9	1	5	5	2	1	2	0	25 38%
NCTE	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	7 11%
NSTA	13	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	17 26%
NCSS	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	5 8%
IRAVILA	1	1	5	2	0	0	3	0	12 18%
Totals	30	3	10	7	5	1	5	5	66
%	45%	5%	15%	11%	8%	2%	8%	8%	

professional development, the theme labeled professional development and teaching tips reflected posts related to improving teaching, directly applicable in the classroom. For example, NCTM posted Halloween inspired math lessons on October 31. Teaching tips or professional development were initially combined with posts later labeled as conference due to the identification of an event. Commercial items referred to sales of products, such as classroom supplies, book, or services, such as loan services or educational programs. Disciplinary content posts included content specific information opposed to pedagogical tips. For example, NCTM posted an article about the “Story of Gauss,” related to finding the sum of a series of consecutive numbers. The final theme was building community. Two organizations used posts to build community and participation among their members. For example, IRA, on an October 24 post celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Reading Research Quarterly*, asked members to “Help us celebrate by sharing how the journal has impacted your career! Comment here or email cclark@reading.org for more info.” An “other” category was used for miscellaneous content found in the posts. These posts elicited the most numerous likes and shares by followers.

In addition to exploring the content of the posts, data analysis provided insight into the impact of the organization on Facebook users. A developer or manager of each organization’s site added the posts to the Facebook pages. When other users like, share, or comment on a post, the posts appear in the user’s newsfeed and can be viewed by friends in addition to those who are members of the organizational page. Table 5 shows the frequency of likes, shares, and comments for posts by each organization.

Table 5
Secondary Impact of NCTM and NCTE Posts

Org.	Facebook Activity	Conf. or webinar	Political or current event	Teaching tips or professional development	Teaching resources	Commercial items	Disciplinary content	Building community	Other	Totals
NCTM	Posts	9	1	5	5	2	1	2	0	25
# members	Likes	272	93	525	525	74	52	65	0	1,606
	Shares	25	0	448	327	47	28	2	0	877
	Comments	8	6	0	58	0	0	0	0	72
	Totals	314	100	978	915	123	81	69	0	2,580
NCTE	Posts	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	7
# members	Likes	171	0	0	0	0	0	0	56	227
	Shares	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	24
	Comments	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	11
	Totals	204	0	0	0	0	0	0	65	269

*Update cover photo with Writing Day

Table 5 continued

Org.	Facebook Activity	Conf. or webinar	Political or current event	Teaching tips or professional development	Teaching resources	Commercial items	Disciplinary content	Building community	Other	Totals
IRA/ILA	Posts	1	1	5	2	0	0	3	0	12
# members	Likes	0	142	656	256	0	0	67	9	1,130
	Shares	1	21	430	96	0	0	21	0	569
	Comments	1	8	3	2	0	0	39	0	53
	Totals	3	172	1,094	356	0	0	130	9	1,764

Through a qualitative analysis of profiles and posting on Facebook, the qualitative data reflect ways education organizations use a Web platforms to promote professional development within the context of a Web 2.0 environment. While Facebook posts were analyzed in this study, most organizations utilize multiple social network platforms to reach a wide audience. For example, each of the organizations studied also utilize Twitter.

Discussion

Because professional development generally refers to ongoing learning opportunities for teachers, we concluded that 73% of organizational posts related to professional development, whether it was an event, a teaching tip, a resource, or disciplinary content. This finding is significant because of the five organizations studied, all but one presented a mission statement that related in some way related to professional development or promotion of learning. The exception (NCSS) listed no mission on its Facebook page. It is important to note that while most organizational mission statements aligned with Facebook posts, ILA's mission statement specified professional development within a Web 2.0, global environment (Table 2), using verbiage such as "global," "connecting," and "spread the transformative power of literacy to every corner of the world." Considering this mission, it seems ILA intentionally plans to use social media as a tool for either professional development or professional connections across the world. ILA was one of just two organizations that posted "Building Community" posts. These posts have potential to promote conversations among online participants. Although NCTM's building community post did not elicit

comments, ILA's posts (a total of three) prompted 67 likes, 29 shares, and 39 comments. The wording in these posts encouraged members to share information.

One might assume that organizations with the largest numbers of followers would attract the largest numbers of likes, shares, and comments. This was not the case with the posts in this study. The two organizations with the largest number of followers, NCTE and NSTA did not attract as much activity as other organizations. The organizations with the greatest secondary impact were NCTM and ILA. The researchers also found that posts related to teaching tips and teaching resources initiated the most shares and likes. Over the course of one month, NCTM's post related to teaching tips and teaching resources elicited 1,050 likes, 775 shares, and 58 comments and ILA's post related to teaching tips and teaching resources elicited 912 likes, 526 shares, and 5 comments. This is relevant because it indicates that followers seek useful and practical information from these sites.

Organizations that post more frequently have the potential to increase the number of followers of the profile because the activity appears in the newsfeeds of followers, and the activity is noted in the newsfeeds of friends. Education organizations could promote their mission and gain potential membership by promoting participation in Web 2.0 environments. This is not a new revelation for these organizations. However, insight into the types of post which elicit participation and conversation may help leaders in these organizations reach followers in more effective ways. Facebook is a well-known platform for sharing and connecting. In this study, education organizations used Facebook for these purposes as well as for professional de-

velopment, by sharing teaching tips and resources in the online environment. However, based on the types of posts liked, shared, and commented on by followers, it seems additional posts in this area may be beneficial for promoting the organization. Based on Facebook activity, the opportunity for organizations to promote their mission of professional development is present.

Implications

The Texas Association of Teacher Educators (TxATE), the Texas Association of Literacy Education (TALE), Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (TCTELA), and the Texas Council of Teacher of Mathematics (TCTM), and other Texas teacher organizations should consider the various ways to impact teachers. Promoting professional development through Facebook participation may be a good way to start. Organizations wishing to promote professional development might increase monthly posts on teaching tips to benefit the organizations and the followers. Posting teaching tips leads to increased exposure, so organizations might consider providing practical information teachers can use in the classroom. Posting teaching tips also promotes effective teaching, which is the point of professional development. The organizations typically posted articles about teaching tips. Perhaps additional modes of communication could be used to support best practice. For example, videos were not posted by organizations during the one month period. Videos might be a beneficial way to model the implementation of a strategy or teaching method.

Results from this study provide some insight into the use of social media for professional development, but

much more work would be required in order to obtain a thorough understanding of social media use and impact. For example, it would be helpful to know if some organizations pay individuals to maintain social networking sites while others cannot afford this luxury. Further research on social media and professional development might include an analysis of comments by followers, long-range data collection, and various social media platforms. Other educational sites such as ReadWriteThink.org and Educreations do not have official membership outside of digital followership, but contain data characteristic of professional development. In addition, it may be pertinent to investigate ways Facebook sites are managed by organizations (salaried positions, elected officers, or volunteers).

In conclusion, social media have potential to impact professional development. Organizations can increase their followership with active profiles on Facebook or other platforms. The findings likely apply to other disciplines, but the results of this study imply educators can benefit from the materials posted by professional organizations. Social media enables professionals to build a network of colleagues that extends beyond geographical boundaries.

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