

Situating the Conversation on Social Media, Emerging Spaces and Professional Development in the Twenty-First Century

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It is undeniable that social media and its uses are impacting the world. In the global arena, examples quickly emerge around its influence on elections and political movements that have toppled governments (Howard and Parks 2012; Harb 2011; Christensen 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012); its use in advancing causes and agendas are evidenced by hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter and #bringourgirlsback; its ability to spread news and connect to events internationally are evidenced by #PrayForParis, and its use to ‘check-in’ as ‘safe’ in the case of emergencies. It also is equally undeniable that there are negative consequences involving the use of social media as exemplified by the tragic death of a Rutgers University student (Byers 2013) and numerous instances of cyberbullying and harassment (See: Görzig and Frumkin 2013; Luxton et al. 2012; Xantus et al. 2015). Social media usage beyond (re)connecting with friends or sharing family photos and trending memes continues to grow and has become a staple in daily life. However, what does this mean for professionals and researchers?

Social media and emerging spaces engage and enable individuals to extend their personal learning networks in a variety of ways. Twitter chats occur regularly, professionally related Facebook groups are commonly utilized, and discussions between professionals are held via group text messaging on

various mobile platforms. In short, it is no mere hyperbole to argue that while once discouraged and dismissed, social media have become an integral part of contemporary digital life around the world (boyd 2015). Yet, when it comes to education and the workplace, recognizing activities occurring in these spaces, especially as related to professional development, is missing, underreported, or at best still emerging. We believe that the social media phenomenon has matured beyond the sum of its parts and warrants scholarly investigation (boyd 2015). In this issue, and in the collection of works contained therein, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon by examining social media from the aspect of professional development.

The purpose of this special issue is to advance the use, practices, issues, and ethical considerations of social media and emerging spaces for professional development purposes. We sought manuscripts that highlight theory and practice detailing informal and formal learning trends across professions where social media serves as the primary platform for delivering continuing education. The individual articles therefore represent a variety of research, conceptual frameworks, and methods related to this topic. This issue began with 30 submissions, which were narrowed to the 9 manuscripts presented here. Our reading of the manuscripts led us to distilling three themes for the special issue: 1) Assessment and use, 2) Applied research and 3) Policy.

Assessment and use of Social Media in Professional Development A common discussion around social media and professional development centers around assessing participation and finding illustrative use cases that can be adopted or adapted. The articles in this section address this point. In the first manuscript for this section, “Preservice teachers’ participation and perceptions of Twitter live chats as personal learning networks,” Tian Luo, Jamie Sickel and Li Cheng, employ a

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multiple case-study design approach to provide an in-depth understanding of how students participate and perceive their own learning in a Twitter-supported live chat settings. The second article, “*Mapping playgrids for learning across space, time, and scale*,” by Ty Hollett and Jeremiah H. Kalir, presents a case study that examines how two platforms enabled learners to curate and participate among their own digital resources and pathways for learning. “Enriching Professional Learning Networks: A Framework for Identification, Reflection, and Intention,” the third article in this section, by Daniel G. Krutka, Jeffrey P. Carpenter and Torrey Trust, argues that social media services can mediate professional engagements with a wide variety of people, spaces and tools that might not otherwise be available. The fourth and final article in this section, “Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres on Facebook and Twitter: An Exploration through Social Media,” by Matthew Stranach, Jaymie Koroluk and Bridgette Atkins, presents an introductory review of Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres (TLCs) to determine the extent to which Canadian TLCs use social media and the ways in which these are used.

Applied Research on Social Media and Professional Development When researching an emerging or relatively new phenomenon, choosing an appropriate research method often challenges researchers. The articles in this section provide examples of applied research on social media and professional development. Hannah Gerber and Tom Liam start of this section by making a case for looking at metadata in Social Media Research of Professional Learning Communities. Their article “Into the Meta: Research Methods for Moving Beyond Social Media Surfacing” proposes a mixed methods approach, which includes engaging in traditional qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups to address limitation, biases and ethical considerations around using social media metadata. In the second article, Spencer P. Greenhalgh and Matthew J. Koehler focus on instances where Twitter has made just-in-time learning possible. In “28 Days Later: Twitter Hashtags as “Just in Time” Teacher Professional Development,” the authors examine the use of an educational hashtag to create a temporary affinity space supporting French teachers preparing to discuss terrorist attacks in their classes. In “Three Cases of Hashtags Used as Learning and Professional Development Environments,” George Veletsianos uses a collective case study methodology to report on users’ participation patterns, users’ roles, and content contributed to three unique hashtags and offers insights into the use of hashtags as emerging learning and professional development environments.

Policy, Social Media and Professional Development Two articles in this issue highlight the importance of policy considerations. Luke Rodesiler, reminds us that regardless of the capacity and capability social media has in supporting teachers’ professional development, there are at times policies that dictate to varying degrees how teachers, especially at the K-12 level can use a district’s network and related technologies. In “Local Social Media Policies Governing Teachers’ Professionally Oriented Participation Online: A Content Analysis,” the author conducted an ethnographic content analysis to build an understanding of the policies that stand to guide teachers’ professionally oriented participation online. In the final article, Dian Walster uses an autoethnography method in “Information Policy and Social Media: Accept or Decline” to examine how intersections between information policy and social media affect professional ethics and instructional decision making as considered through the lens of professional development and continuing education.

The articles in this issue represent a small sample of the work being done around social media, emerging spaces and professional development. Our goal was to contribute to this conversation and to encourage researchers and practitioners alike to (re)conceptualise, (re)examine and explore how social media and emerging technologies are impacting existing practices such as that of professional development.

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