

Professional Learning Practices and Beliefs of an Online Community of English Language Teachers

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This study investigated the domain and practice of an online community of practice formed by English language teachers (ELTs) on Twitter as a professional learning network (PLN). A “Communities of Practice” framework (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) was applied to the qualitative analysis of interviews and publicly accessible social media data of 20 participants. This paper reports on the extent to which members of the PLN use social media for professional purposes and their perceptions of the value of social media in comparison to more traditional means of professional learning: reading ELT textbooks, reading scholarly articles on pedagogy and applied linguistics, and participating in ELT conferences. Findings demonstrate that this PLN functioned as a community of practice that valued social media as a tool in conjunction with the more traditional means of professional learning. Participants said social media had particular advantages, including accessibility, brevity, and low cost. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research and implications for hybrid ELT professional learning practices.

Professional learning online and on social media is becoming widespread for teachers in many countries. Macia and Garcia (2016) reviewed selected studies on informal online communities and networks as a source of teacher development. The authors stated,

Although informal learning and online collaboration have been largely studied, the corpus of research on teachers’ online collaboration for professional development is not extensive and, in most cases, the examples of communities and networks that have been analyzed were developed for research purposes in university environments. (p. 293)

Inspired by this concern, the research presented here investigated an informal community or network that developed organically. Because the field of teacher professional development in online communities is arguably at an early stage of development, this study applied the most widely used theoretical framework, Communities of Practice, to aid the process of finding commonalities across similar studies (Macia & Garcia, 2016).

The study presented here focused on English language teachers (ELTs) who had a common global interest in learning from each other. Through my own professional learning practices, I had discovered many ELTs were tweeting from all over the globe united in language and professional development, providing evidence that social media can help teachers, with varying degrees of experience, find meaningful professional learning outside the boundaries of their respective institutions.

Literature Review

Varying Models for Professional Learning

The terms “professional development” and “professional learning” are often used interchangeably in the literature on teacher education (Avalos, 2011). In this paper the term “professional learning” is defined as the practice of teachers to support their pedagogical and content knowledge as well as their teaching practices for the purposes of improving student learning and relevance in the field (as also in Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016). In the case of this study, the field is English language teaching, in which “pedagogical knowledge” generally refers to education theories and “content knowledge” generally refers to the knowledge of applied linguistics.

In a review of professional learning articles, Avalos (2011) noted that the traditional in-service teacher training model for professional learning has many limitations, a claim supported by other studies (Apple, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos, 2009; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Gibson & Brooks, 2013; Guskey, 2003; Kennedy, 2005; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Trust et al., 2016). Gibson and Brooks (2013) pointed out that the traditional model often provides little applicability to the classroom, overloads teachers with content, uses the one-size-fits-all approach and, offers no modeling, practice, and follow-up. They also argued that administrators have minimal awareness if the curriculum has changed as a result of traditional professional learning practices.

Duncan-Howell (2010) added that this traditional face-to-face model does not encourage the development of new skills nor does it have a lasting effect on teaching practices. For some teachers, these in-service professional development models are sometimes perceived as deskilling “teachers from their intellectual work, treating them as passive recipients of mandates” (Apple, 2009; Trust et al. , 2016).

An alternative to the traditional in-service teacher-training model is online (or computer-mediated) professional learning. Within the past two decades, more studies and articles have described and promoted the benefits of this approach (Gibson & Brooks, 2013; Guskey, 2003; Kennedy, 2005; Macia & Garcia, 2016; Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012; Reich, Levinson, & Johnston, 2011; Stickler & Emke, 2015; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007).

Online professional learning is reported by some as more coherent and better connected to the school’s goals and to teachers’ needs (Gibson & Brooks, 2012; Stickler & Emke, 2015). Some teachers have thus claimed that this online learning has resulted in an increase in student learning and achievement (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Day, 2012; Stickler & Emke, 2015) and a greater sense of teacher satisfaction with the collaboration process (Reich, Levinson, & Johnson, 2011; Stickler & Emke, 2015). Gibson and Brooks (2012) claimed that online professional learning can be ongoing and intensive; it can be more focused on content and curriculum, and it is delivered in more meaningful and relevant ways that provide opportunities for practice and feedback. Finally, online professional

learning is usually less expensive, especially for freelance or part-time instructors who may not be supported with district funding for professional development (Stickler & Emke, 2015).

Concerns teachers have about online professional learning include privacy (Akcayir, 2017; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013), defining professional boundaries (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), and institutional constraints (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Walster, 2017).

Online Communities for Professional Learning

In 2010, Duncan-Howell referred to online communities as a new source of professional learning. Online communities can be formal or informal. A formal community has specific goals for the community, and the success of a formal online community is defined by how well it meets these goals and how well it cultivates sharing and trust (Booth, 2012; Bourhis & Dube, 2010). An informal online community creates a learning ecology (Hill, Wilson, & Watson, 2004), which encompasses informal collaborative learning environments. In this sense, the main difference is that a formal community has a shared goal or objective, whereas members each have their own individual goals in an informal community.

Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, have helped teachers create online communities for professional learning (Booth, 2012; Brass & Mecoli, 2011; Brown & Munger, 2010; Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2009; Davis, 2015; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Holmes, 2013; Hur & Brush, 2009; Schlager, Farooq, Fusco, Schank, & Dwyer, 2009; Tsai, 2012; Tsai, Laffey, & Hanuscin, 2010; Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008; Wesely, 2013; Zuidema, 2012). Social media helps online community members gain access to professional learning resources that might have been previously difficult to find (Booth, 2012; Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009; Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love, & Hewson, 2010; Nochumson, 2018; Schlager et al., 2009). These communities “can allow teachers to diversify their networks and to gain access to human and content resources not available locally” and “give teachers agency in co-constructing their own personalized programs of professional learning” (Reich et al., 2011, p. 384).

Online communities are social learning structures and the term can be used interchangeably with online networks. A commonly used term for online networks for professional learning is professional learning networks (PLNs). Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat (2011) distinguished between the two stating that communities are “the development of a shared identity around a topic or set of challenges,” whereas networks are “the set of relationships, personal interactions, and connections among participants who have personal reasons to connect” (p. 9). In this paper, PLNs refer to online communities for professional learning.

Professional Learning Networks as Communities of Practice

Several studies have described and analyzed PLNs through the theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (Booth, 2012; Cranefield & Yoong, 2009; Davis, 2015; El-Hani & Greca, 2013; Hur & Brush, 2009; Ranieri, Manca, & Fini, 2012; Tsai, 2012; Wesely, 2013). Booth (2012) described communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). The Communities of Practice framework (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) is grounded on a social theory of learning, postulating that learning is the product of a community and its interactions.

In her qualitative study of world language teachers on Twitter, Wesely (2013) posited that PLNs can serve as communities of practice. She analyzed her participants using Wenger's (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) themes of domain, community, and practice. Put simply, the domain refers to the shared interests of the group, in this case the PLN, the community refers directly to the members of the PLN, and the practice refers to the discussions and texts produced by members of the PLN online and offline. Two of these themes, domain and practice, are central to this study.

Davis (2015), Hur and Brush (2009), and Wesely (2013) implemented the framework on their investigations of PLNs already existing outside the control of the researchers or specific institutions. Davis (2015) and Wesely (2013) investigated Twitter as the primary platform for PLN interactions. Five main themes or reasons for using Twitter (Davis, 2015) and other online communities (Hur & Brush, 2009) emerged, many of which overlapped in meaning.

Hur and Brush (2009) found teachers wanted to participate in online communities to experience a sense of camaraderie while Davis' (2015) participants found Twitter promoted a sense of belonging. Teachers also found the technical benefits of Twitter (Davis, 2015) and the advantages of online environments (Hur & Brush, 2009) helped ease facilitation of their professional learning.

Wesely (2013) sought to understand how the characteristics of her participants' community of practice related to teacher learning. Community was the characteristic that overlapped the most with the aforementioned studies, in that she found many of her participants "had a profound feeling of professional isolation in their school environment" (p. 312), and Twitter helped them find this community in their PLN. The difference between the Davis (2015) and Hur and Brush (2009) studies and Wesely's study is that her participants' community was explicitly a site of teacher learning.

Similar to Wesely's study, the current study also investigated preexisting PLNs outside the control of the researchers and sought to examine how PLNs for English language teachers compared and contrasted with PLNs for teachers in general (Davis, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009) and PLNs for world language teachers (Wesely, 2013) using the communities of practice framework.

Research Questions

This study sought to investigate similar issues with the following research questions:

- To what extent do members of a community of practice made up of English language teachers write about professional learning on Twitter and blogs?
- How do members of this community of practice compare professional learning through their PLN with their professional learning through more traditional means, specifically reading textbooks on English language teaching, reading scholarly articles on English language teaching, and participating in professional teaching conferences?

To answer these questions using the Communities of Practice framework, professional learning was the specific type of practice under investigation within the domain that included other interests in that framework (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Method

This case study was an investigation of a PLN and the professional learning practices and perspectives of its members. It was a holistic or single-case study with the PLN as the unit of analysis, studied in the online contexts of social media, primarily Twitter and the blogs written and shared by members of the PLN (Yin, 2009). It was largely a descriptive case study because it presented a detailed account of the domain and practice of the PLN as a community of practice. However, it was also an evaluative case study, as the second research question evaluated the PLN's online professional learning in comparison with more traditional methods of professional learning. For both descriptive and evaluative purposes, the case study is an ideal research method for this research because it provides rich, thick descriptions ideal for a Communities of Practice framework (Macia & Garcia, 2016; Merriam, 1998).

Participants

All participants of this study were members of my PLN, most identifying as English language teachers at the time of data collection. Some also identified as researchers in English language teaching. For the purpose of this paper, members of the PLN will be referred to as English language teaching professionals.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants who were already members of the existing PLN. Each participant in the sample already met the following criteria:

1. Was followed by me on Twitter.
2. Followed my account and at least one other member of the PLN on Twitter.
3. Interacted with at least one member of the PLN (other than me) on Twitter at least once a week.
4. Shared or discussed English language teaching issues within the PLN.

Out of the hundreds of English language teachers I followed on Twitter, 20 agreed to participate in the study. Recruitment began on March 15, 2017, and ended on April 10, 2017. All participants signed consent forms approved by my institutional review board. To protect the privacy of the participants, I use pseudonyms in this paper in place of their real names.

At the time of data collection, the participants lived in many parts of the world (see Table 1), with a quarter of them (five of 20) living in Japan. Four of the 20 participants speak English as their second language. Their first languages are Russian (Grace and Rebecca), French (Mira), and Czech (Eve).

Data Collection and Analysis

Three sets of data were collected for this study: interviews, blog posts, and tweets. The primary data set was from the interviews, which were recorded between March 17, 2017, and June 8, 2017. Participants had an option of being interviewed either through synchronous online text using Google documents or through Zoom, an online video conferencing product. Interviews were semistructured; participants were each asked the same set of questions, allowing for follow-up questions depending on the quality and quantity of responses to each question.

Table 1
Participants and Their Collected Publicly Accessible Online Data

Twitter ID	Type of Interview	Country of Residence	English	Most Recent Twitter Data Collected	No. Blog Posts in 12 Mos.
Aaron	Video	UK	L1	Full 12 months	N/A
Andrew	Video	Japan	L1	Until March 1, 2017	N/A
Aurora	Text	Germany	L1	Until July 16, 2016	33
Dustin	Video	USA	L1	Until August 2, 2016	36
Ellen	Video	Italy	L1	Full 12 months	N/A
Erica	Video	Canada	L1	Until March 14, 2017	41
Esther	Video	Japan	L1	Until October 6, 2016	2
Eve	Text	Czech Republic	L2	Full 12 months	46
Felix	Text	Japan	L1	Full 12 months	N/A
Grace	Video	Canada	L2	Until October 24, 2016	8
Harvey	Text	UK	L1	Full 12 months	7
Jesse	Text	USA	L1	Until February 22, 2017	40
Julian	Video	UK	L1	Until August 19, 2016	39
Max	Text	USA	L1	Full 12 months	73
Mira	Text	Saudi Arabia	L2	Full 12 months	0 (last post in April 2016)
Raphael	Video	South Korea	L1	Full 12 months	18
Rebecca	Text	Japan	L2	Full 12 months	13
Stewart	Video	Canada	L1	Until February 6, 2017	4
Sylvester	Video	Japan	L1	Until March 29, 2017	44
Trevor	Text	France	L1	Until April 24, 2017	19

All video interviews were transcribed. Both video and text interviews were coded using open and axial coding techniques (as in Moghaddam, 2006). Open coding was used to identify general categories of information, which were labeled in the margins with summaries. Axial coding disaggregated the open codes and organized interview data into four major categories.

Three of these categories answered research questions for this paper. These three categories were identity, network, and professional learning. Each category followed additional levels of axial coding and analysis. For the identity category, two responses to interview questions were coded into themes. For example, the responses to the question, “Why do you use social media for professional learning?” were coded into 22 themes.

For the network category, general comments about social media represented one category, whereas the names of individuals and blogs that each participant followed represented the other. These general comments were further divided into general comments about Twitter and general comments about blogs and blogging.

Of the three major axial codes, the professional learning category yielded the most information. This code addressed statements in the interviews comparing professional learning on social media to three more traditional means of professional learning: textbooks, scholarly articles, and conferences. Face-to-face school or district-based means of professional learning were not included because most of the participants were not in public school systems where these are commonly offered.

Three three-column tables were designed for this analysis. Each table represented the comparison between professional learning on social media and one of the more traditional means of professional learning. For each table, the left column listed codes addressing social media, whereas the right column listed codes addressing one of the more traditional means, and the middle column listed codes listed items that addressed them equally. See Tables 2, 3, and 4 for abridged examples of each type.

Table 2
Social Media vs. Textbooks

Social Media	Both	Textbooks
Quicker (4) More accessible (4) Multiple perspectives (3)	Enables authors to expand (2) Enables readers to question (2)	Foundations we have and need (2) Don't have the time to read full books (2)

Table 3
Social Media vs. Scholarly Articles

Social Media	Both	Articles
Free (2) Help more with the practical aspect (2) Shorter (2)	Access (4) Discuss articles on social media (2) Bridge (2)	Not necessarily written with teachers in mind (2) Meaty and hard to digest (2)

Table 4
Social Media vs. Conferences

Social Media	Both	Conferences
Cheaper (3) Access every day (2) You can always close the window/walk away (2)	Learn about conferences through social media (3) Social media shares videos of/from conferences (4)	Happen once in a while (2) Immediacy of various forms of communication (2)

Publicly accessible online document data were also collected and coded from two types of sources, Twitter and blogs. Because several of the participants had tweeted more than 10,000 times, data collection was limited to 12 months (June 30, 2016, to June 30, 2017) or the most recent 1,000 tweets. For example, Trevor tweeted the most frequently, 1,000 times from late June 2017, to April 24, 2017. Therefore, the maximum number of tweets coded per participant was 1,000. Eleven participants tweeted 1,000 times within a year.

Sixteen participants had publicly accessible blogs that had at least one post addressing English language teaching issues. Similar to Twitter data, data collection was limited to the 12 months, June 30, 2016, to June 30, 2017. Fifteen of the 16 blogged within that time frame, and the number of posts ranged from two (Esther) to 73 (Max). Table 1 shows the online document data collected from each participant.

Each participant's Twitter data was scanned for content related to ELT issues only. All other content on Twitter was not collected. Because of the high volume of Twitter data, the coding process analyzed tweets by month, coding ELT-related topics or issues that arose more than twice each month. The same process was applied to ELT-related hashtags, such as #eltchat, referring to a semistructured tweet chat, and #TESOL17, referring to the International TESOL Association's 2017 Convention and Expo.

After the topics and hashtags were coded, they were analyzed for frequency by each participant and by the PLN as a whole to identify what they tweeted about in descending order, not including topics or hashtags used once a month. The topics were also themed if and when they were found to have similar content or content that greatly overlapped. For example, the codes for webinars, websites, online courses, and online resources were eventually grouped under one theme: online resources.

Only 15 of the 20 participants had blogs with posts between June 30, 2016, and June 30, 2017. Table 1 shows the number of blog posts per blog. Just like collection and analysis process for the Twitter data, only blog posts about ELT issues were included. Each post as a whole, as opposed to the contents of each post, was coded using a spreadsheet that listed at least one code per post.

After coding all ELT-relevant blog posts, 124 different codes were identified. These open codes were then themed into 16 themes and a 17th "other" axial code for single codes that did not fit the other themes. These axial codes were then listed in order of frequency by the PLN as a whole.

An outside researcher coded the raw data independently to identify any codes that may have been overlooked or mislabeled. After analysis was completed and the first draft of this article was completed, the participants were invited to check the results to verify if they were represented accurately in the paper. This member checking helped to increase the accuracy of the findings and improve the validity of this study (Creswell, 2014).

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the domain, practice, and beliefs of a Community of Practice, specifically a PLN of ELTs on Twitter. The first research question asked about the domain, uncovering the "shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015): What aspects of English language teaching did the participants discuss, tweet, and blog about? The second research question explored one specific aspect of the PLN's practice, sharing professional learning online: How do members of this PLN compare professional learning through social media with professional learning through more traditional means: reading textbooks on ELT, reading scholarly articles on ELT, and participating in professional teaching conferences?

PLN Domain: How Important Is Professional Learning to the PLN?

This section identifies the extent to which professional learning is discussed among ELT topics on Twitter and the participants' blogs over the course of 1 year. The Twitter data

results are divided into tweets and hashtags, as some participants used hashtags more frequently or habitually than others.

The most common practice was sharing blog posts written by other ELT professionals. One specific blog that many participants shared is *ELT Research Bites*, created by Dustin with several collaborators from this PLN, including Aurora and Trevor. Other members of this PLN who did not collaborate on writing posts helped to share and promote the blog and specific posts of interest. Sharing blog posts exposes members of the PLN to literature they might otherwise not see and, therefore, contributes to their general awareness of current issues.

Beyond sharing blogs and blog posts, this study found 14 other common themes and issues that make up this PLN's domain. Listed in descending order of frequency, these issues are as follows: conferences, students, online resources other than blogs, teacher equity (primarily for nonnative English speakers), technology for teachers, research, blog and research writing, professional learning, teachers' wellbeing, teacher education, grammar, promoting a global online teacher development institute, pronunciation/phonology, and the politics of work. These 15 common themes demonstrate that sharing professional learning is the major overarching theme of this PLN. Of these themes, seven can be categorized as tools for professional learning: conferences, online resources, instructional technology, research, writing, teacher education, and promoting a global online teacher development institute.

In addition to analyzing the ELT topics or issues that PLN members tweeted, this study also analyzed the hashtags frequently used on Twitter. According to Twitter (2017), "A hashtag—written with a # symbol—is used to index keywords or topics on Twitter. This function was created on Twitter, and allows people to easily follow topics they are interested in" (np).

This study identified 81 hashtags that were used more than once a month over the course of a year, with 29 of them used more than 1 month or more than one person. Ten of these 29 hashtags were about professional teaching conferences. Among the other 19 hashtags used, #ELTchat denotes an overlapping community of practice of ELTs. #ELTchat is usually a synchronous tweet chat organized by CELTA trainers with an ELT-related prompt once a week (ELTchat, 2017). Five participants were involved in #ELTchat more than once a month.

In addition to Twitter data, blog data were analyzed to learn more about the PLN domain; however, blog data is considered secondary to the Twitter data because many of the participants stated that they did not follow their peers' blogs as closely as their peers' tweets. For example, Julian admitted he "kind of stopped reading them" (Network, March 30, 2017), and Andrew stated, "These days I don't even really follow blogs that much" (Network, April 6, 2017). Furthermore Dustin, Grace, and Ellen claimed they did not follow any blogs specifically.

Most of the participants said they would read a blog if it was posted on Twitter and they found the topic interesting. Of the blog data, 16 themes and a 17th "other" theme emerged after the 124 codes were categorized. Figure 1 shows the number of blog posts per theme.

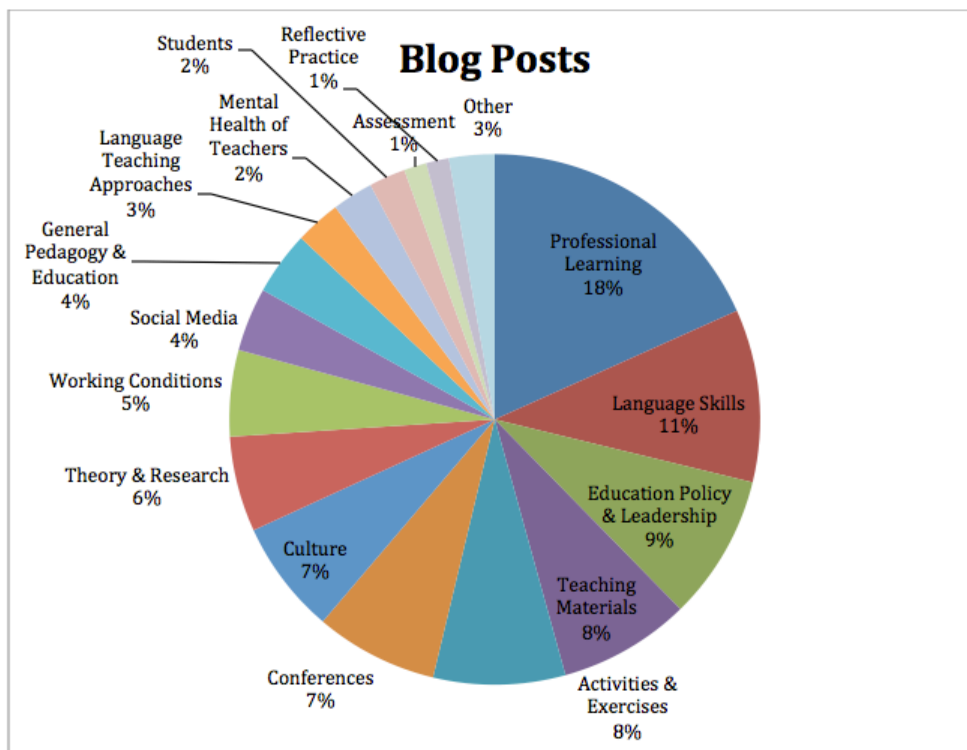


Figure 1. Number of blog posts per theme.

Members of the PLN blogged about professional learning the most. There were a total of 66 posts generally related to professional learning and, five specifically focused on professional learning. The other blog posts included characteristics of or tools for professional learning. Examples of characteristics of professional learning included exploring teacher beliefs and teacher identity. Examples of tools for professional learning included peer feedback and special interest groups for ELTs. Table 5 provides examples for of the 16 themes.

The seven codes that could not be categorized and themed as “other” were as follows: publishing or getting published (two posts); getting into a workflow (two posts); and writing in the Polish language (two posts). The remaining four codes had one post each: authenticity, bilingualism, English clubs for students, and new teachers.

Through the analysis of Twitter and blog data, it was evident that the domain of this PLN was English language teaching. In this domain, ELTs shared their blog posts on Twitter about their professional learning and their concerns about teaching and learning within their particular contexts. Many of their tweets were about ELT-related professional conferences, their students, and sharing online ELT resources. The hashtags they used also reflect the conferences they attended and online communities of discussion, such as #ELTchat. Twitter was the dominant communication tool.

Table 5
Blog Post Themes

Theme	Examples	Theme	Examples
Professional Learning	Teacher beliefs, peer feedback	Working conditions	Native-speakers/NNESTs, leaving a job
Language Skills	Grammar, vocabulary	Social Media	Blogging, #tleap
Educational Policy & Leadership	Observations, education news	General Pedagogy & Education	Needs analysis, online learning
Teaching Materials	Technology, course books	Language Teaching Approaches	CLIL, EAP
Activities & Exercises	Role-playing games, no-prep activities	Mental Health of Teachers	(no subcategories)
Conferences	IATEFL 2017, TESOL 2017	Students	Appreciation, feedback
Culture	Culture learning, intercultural issues	Assessment	Tests, ePortfolios
Theory & Research	<i>ELT Research Bites</i> , researchers	Reflections	Retrospection, first experiences

PLN Practice

This PLN’s professional learning practices and beliefs emerged from the interviews in which participants compared their social media practices to the more traditional means of professional learning: reading textbooks for ELTs, reading scholarly articles about English language teaching, and attending and participating in ELT conferences.

Compared to ELT Textbooks. When asked to compare social media to ELT textbooks for the purposes of professional learning, the participants revealed much about the appeal of social media. Convenience, accessibility, and personalization were the top three categorized benefits to using social media over ELT textbooks for professional learning.

Eight participants noted how social media is quicker, fitting into the little time they have for professional learning. Andrew explained,

Partly, [social media tools are] just quicker ... so it’s ... easier to grab something like that, especially when you’re busy. I mean I never have enough time to actually sit down with full journal articles or full books really to dig into them that much these days (Social Media vs. Textbooks, April 6, 2017)

The quickness Andrew referred to was also linked to the shortness of most social media posts. Twitter at the time of study was limited to 140 characters. Ellen elaborated on how the concise nature appealed to her,

[Social media] will give you a taste or an idea. So somebody might say, “Try this, I recommend this.” And if they recommended something in the past and they found it useful, you’ll probably take that recommendation and be encouraged to read it

further. Yes, it's a more succinct version. (Social Media vs. Textbooks, April 4, 2017)

Eight participants also praised social media for its accessibility, as Julian shared:

And access: you can check these things on your mobile phone or on your tablet, which people tend to have with them all the time. I certainly do. And then also, I guess this is more personal to me, I have always struggled with the concept of picking up a book and reading a bit of it. And saying, 'Yeah, you need to read chapter four of this book.' It somehow seems wrong. I want to read the whole thing, so I don't pick up the thing at all. If I don't have the time to read the whole book — this is why it's worth using social media, shared content like a blog post. You don't go read every blog on a blog post. You just read that one post. (Social Media vs. Textbooks, March 30, 2017)

Six participants made the case that social media posts are more personal or relevant to their professional learning needs. Eve shared the good and bad aspects of this personalized professional learning:

But [the posts] are also more personal. The things people share on social media may not be accurate or even true or right, or I don't have to agree with them, but what they share is their unique perspective. And that's what I like. (Social Media vs. Textbooks, April 20, 2017)

Less frequently than convenience, accessibility, and personalization, the participants mentioned that social media posts were more current, more frequent, free, and more interactive. Several participants described this interactive function of social media, which is not only interactive between members of the PLN but also between members and textbook authors. Following are a few examples of this interactivity:

- Aurora – “Also, it's interactive, so you can check whether you've understood, you can share your own ideas, see or question what others out there are doing, instead of being a passive recipient of something that someone outside of your context has written. But social media can also lead us to some really good books on teaching” (Social Media vs. Textbooks, March 17, 2017).
- Mira – “Social media helps readers and authors extend the text in real time. I remember a good example of that is Thornbury's *AZ of ELT*. When his blog was live, it was brilliant! I had the book and pretty much all the questions I used to ask myself would come up either on a post or the ensuing discussion which was usually even more interesting than the blog post itself. ... Social media also enables authors to expand and readers to question and get answer. That in itself is priceless” (Social Media vs. Textbooks, April 14, 2017).

These two quotes show the reciprocal nature of professional learning on social media and with ELT textbook and their authors.

Although there was substantially more praise for “social media” compared to “criticism,” several participants shared their concerns for the quality of the content, as Eve mentioned. Others commented on the low quality of writing and scholarship on social media and noted that reading posts on social media is often more distracting and superficial compared to reading ELT textbooks.

Compared to Scholarly Articles. When asked to compare professional learning on social media with professional learning through reading scholarly articles, participants shared the benefits for using social media as described earlier. A few participants suggested that scholarly articles are not ideal for teachers. Jesse explained his viewpoint:

As (it seems) several recent high-profile articles and talks have intimated (though this by no means is a new concern), the form of academic App Ling/SLA/ELT research is far from ideal in terms of teacher consumption. Social media is a true 'bottom-up' medium by its nature. As long as the quantity and quality of teachers engage and create the kind of 'open source' content [that] they do, focused on classroom experiences, ideas, perceptions (cognitions, all) – it will perform a function that formal research ... never will" (Social Media vs. Scholarly Articles, April 3, 2017).

Grace provided another perspective on the roles of scholarly articles and social media for ELT professional learning:

[Research] helps teachers to be more reflexive, to be more careful in how they approach different issues. It helps them to be mindful of what they do to approach the subject matter with caution. But it doesn't often give them solutions of like how to do it, right? And I think that learning on Twitter from fellow practitioners is more relevant to practice rather than deepening understanding (Social Media vs. Scholarly Articles, April 5, 2017).

Grace was not alone in her sentiment. A few other participants noted that social media serves as a bridge between teachers and research. For example, Julian said, "So the scholarly article would be the theoretical foundations ... and then the social media post, the blog, or whatever, that would be the more practical side of it" (Social Media vs. Scholarly Articles, March 30, 2017).

Beyond these comparisons, participants also mentioned they found social media, particularly blogs posts, helpful for summarizing research articles, such as explaining statistics to ELTs who may not understand complicated equations and formulas. Andrew shared that social media acts as a reminder for him to read certain articles. Furthermore, Stewart stated, "Social media is a good way to be pointed in the direction of particular articles that I wouldn't normally find myself" (Social Media vs. Scholarly Articles, March 22, 2017). Felix claimed that thought-provoking tweets or blog posts act as a gateway to exploring issues that are covered more in depth in journals.

Compared to Conferences. Although some participants admitted that social media has its drawbacks, all of the participants reported social media by itself has more benefits to professional learning than do textbooks and scholarly articles alone. This sentiment did not transfer to conferences, where the participants were more divided on the value of conferences compared to social media. On one side of the spectrum, Eve claimed to "really love conferences even more than spending time on social media" (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 20, 2017) while, at the other end of the spectrum, another participant found "conferences in TEFL [teaching English as a foreign language] are, to some extent, entirely pointless" (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 19, 2017).

Also, unlike textbooks and scholarly articles, more participants reported that social media and conferences mutually supported one another. For example, a few participants talked about the phenomena of live tweeting, in which people tweet summaries of what they are learning or reactions to sessions they are attending. In his interview, Jesse wrote,

I kind of see [social media and conferences] as connected, as fused – just now the IATEFL [International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language] conference is going on, and so many people are live-tweeting sessions. This is such a great development. It seems like IATEFL is really taking this thing by the horns; their online stuff gets better each year, so that the conference suffers less and less from a sense of exclusivity – sort of a hallmark of conferences, seems to me. Social media postings may lack so-called “rigor,” but the best kind of social media communications – even if they are as short as a single tweet – DO ‘lead somewhere’, they are really the opposite of the caricature of the vapid, short, useless statement that a ‘tweet’ is sometimes perceived as ...” (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 7, 2017).

Although Grace said that some conference attendees may find live tweeting annoying and rude, she believed it was worth the effort: “I think the value of putting that stuff out there and try to have a discussion around the conference is worth it. And if you try to be reasonably discreet, it shouldn’t bother people too much” (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 5, 2017).

Mira, Andrew, and Stewart shared Grace’s perception that social media helps extend the discussion beyond the walls of the conference. Rebecca stated a similar idea, that social media “really enhances the experience” of going to a conference, explaining that sharing what she learned on a blog helps her process her learning (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 9, 2017).

Several participants shared their positive social media experiences associated with IATEFL’s and the International TESOL Association’s 2017 conferences. Specifically, Mira, Aaron, Erica, and Ellen mentioned the convenience of being able to watch recorded sessions that people or the organization (such as IATEFL) uploaded and shared on social media. Because of this Aaron said there was not much difference between professional learning on social media and at conferences: “I guess increasingly there isn’t that much of a difference because a lot of the sessions from IATEFL were recorded and you can watch them all online. And a lot of blog posts discuss them or link to them” (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 11, 2017).

Several participants, however, said that professional learning practices at conferences have advantages that social media does not. Some participants said that networking on social media and at conferences are equally effective, but two (Grace and Max) said the personal connection they make meeting people face-to-face between or after sessions is a more rewarding experience than meeting a colleague on Twitter.

None of the participants made claims for the opposite, but some of the participants shared their enthusiasm for meeting people (people they first “met” on Twitter) for the first time face-to-face at conferences. For example, Esther said, “I like attending conferences because I can meet the people I know on social media” (Social Media vs. Conferences, March 23, 2017). Her sentiment was also shared by Dustin, who said, “So last week...at TESOL, I was able to meet a lot of people that I only met online and that was a kind of surreal, really interesting experience, something I really enjoy doing” (Social Media vs. Conferences, April 3, 2017). Stewart noted, “And you know, the conferences and events and things like that, they’re wonderful for connecting the people who are writing these posts I think on a personal level or at least a face-to-face level” (Social Media vs. Conferences, March 22, 2017).

Although the quality of networking may be more rewarding at conferences, people can interact with a higher quantity of ELTs on Twitter, as Max stated:

You can meet a much greater variety of people through the Internet, but you (of course) remember much more the people that you meet in real life. Even with the people who I mostly interact with over the Internet, I tend to listen more carefully and regard their writing as the speech of a real person rather than something akin to Wikipedia if I've actually met them. To be honest, many of my twitter ELT cohorts and fellow ELT bloggers kind of blend together in my mind. (Social Media vs. Conferences, March 22, 2017)

Therefore, for many of the participants, conferences and social media complemented each other, enhancing their professional learning.

Discussion

All of these findings reflect patterns that are congruent with the Communities of Practice framework and with findings from the literature. Using Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) themes as a guide, this study illustrates that the domain of this PLN is professional learning for English language teachers. The community of the PLN is comprised entirely of English language teachers, to a greater extent, and researchers, to a lesser extent.

The practices of the PLN are found in the blogs and tweets (microblogs) of the participants. Therefore, this PLN fits Booth's (2012) definition of a community of practice because most of the participants share their concerns for the professional development of ELTs, deepening their expertise in applied linguistics and pedagogy by interacting on an ongoing basis.

These participants' testimonies support claims that online communities provide a sense of camaraderie and promote a sense of belonging (Davis, 2015; Hur & Brush, 2009) as well as Wesely's (2013) claim that the interactions also changed their behavior in terms of their reliance on Twitter for professional learning. In the context of this study, the participants claimed to change their participation in conferences and reading textbooks or scholarly articles for professional development.

This PLN is diverse in terms of the participants' country of residence, with implications for the classroom context. It is also somewhat diverse in terms of the participants' first language (L1) with the number of L1 English speakers in the majority. For better representation of the field, future studies should include a higher proportion of ELTs whose first language is not English.

These findings support the reported benefits of online professional learning: It is better connected to the teachers' needs and there is a greater sense of satisfaction with the collaborative process. (Gibson & Brooks, 2012; Moolenaar et al., 2012; Stickler & Emke, 2015). Furthermore it supports claims that online professional learning is ongoing and is delivered in more meaningful and relevant ways, ways that provide opportunities for practice and feedback (Gibson & Brooks, 2012).

In terms of the use of social media, Twitter and blogs in this case, this study supports claims that it helps members of a PLN gain more efficient access to resources, such as textbooks or scholarly articles (Booth, 2012; Dede et al., 2009; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2012; Reich et al., 2011; Schlager et al., 2009). Therefore, this study suggests that professional learning through social media should be given more serious consideration by international, national, and regional ELT organizations as a means to engage current and prospective members.

A major limitation to this study is that it investigated a small sample of my own professional learning network, increasing the likelihood that the participants share perspectives similar to mine on the use of social media for professional learning. Because it may be challenging to find active ELTs on social media outside of the investigator's PLN, one solution is to collaborate with a researcher outside the field of ELT for the purposes of reducing bias in the data collection and analysis processes.

The data collection process also harbors some limitations. One is the modification and deletion of social media posts. The participants and the site providers can modify and remove posts at any time during and after the data collection stage. I found evidence of this with Erica when she removed 31 of her 41 blog posts and when Sylvester deleted his Twitter account after data collection was completed. One limitation using Twitter as a research tool is that only the most recent 1,000 tweets of any user can be accessed. For some participants, this number amounted only to a few months of tweets rather than a whole year. No data mining and data scraping programs were used to collect online data. I recommended that future studies take advantage of these programs for a quantitative analysis of PLN domains and practices.

Another limitation relates to what participants described as the "low quality writing and scholarship" of tweets – the lack of a formal peer review process. Instead, we have crowdsourced information, in which teachers can ask for best practices from their PLN. The information, often anecdotal ("what works for me"), is not necessarily supported by the research literature. A future study can investigate how PLNs respond to and attempt to minimize the spread of misinformation regarding professional learning for ELTs.

Because this study was primarily an exploratory study on online communities of practice for ELTs, many questions remain. For example, the connection between professional learning practices on social media and at professional teaching conferences can be further investigated through survey data to better pinpoint the varying interactive practices between the two types of professional learning.

This study also provided evidence of textbook authors interacting with ELTs, the nature of which could be examined in future studies. A follow-up study on the same participants can provide longitudinal data on the evolution of the communities of practice.

Additionally, a larger study can focus on the members of this and similar communities of practice to provide evidence, if any, on Wenger's (1998) constellations of practice. This study investigated professional learning of ELTs, which is quite a broad area. Future studies could focus more specifically on more specific types of professional learning, such as improving classroom management, grammar instruction, or technology integration. Finally, it is important to investigate ELTs who do not use social media for professional learning purposes. Although this study shows many benefits, social media may not be for everyone.

The research presented here provides examples of how social media can provide impactful alternatives to the traditional model of professional learning. It is recommended that administrators of in-service teacher professional development consider integrating social media and online communities into their PD models to promote teacher collaboration within and beyond their respective institutions. If appropriately documented and measured, an online or blended professional learning model may contribute to improved teacher efficiency, as teachers may each be better able to direct their own learning and engage with like-minded teachers, as many of the participants claimed to in this study.

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