

Introduction

Although most of the work of a teacher takes place inside the classroom, learning does not only take place there. Similar to the learning of students, a lot of the learning of teachers takes place outside the classroom. In this short essay the learning potential of networks will be discussed as a means of teacher professionalization. This will be done by reflecting on my experiences with teaching and collaborating with others.

Networking as a source of feedback

Although I am not a teacher in the traditional sense (that is, I do not teach at a school, college or university), I have personally experienced the value a network can bring. When I started as a Scout trainer training new leaders I found myself often confused on how to approach a topic. I mostly struggled with the pedagogical side of teaching. In order to prepare myself for a workshop, I would often find myself thinking about how to approach a topic. Luckily, I had access to an on-line network of training when things seemed desperate for me. However, it was only until I started to intensively work together with other people that were in a similar situation as I was that delivering workshops became easy. This was not so much because we all had the same problem but rather the result of we were able to visit our workshops which created the opportunity to see how others delivered their workshops (and they visiting my workshop). This network which developed spontaneously created the possibility to exchange ideas, give feedback to each other and spread good practices. This allowed all members (me included) to grow as a trainer and to develop professionally.

Measuring the successfulness of a network

More generally speaking, networks (regardless if they are made up of teachers or other groups) are facilitating the spread of information and tend to enhance creativity. However, bigger networks are not always better at this (cf the MOOC Social and Economic Networks: Models and Analysis by Stanford or Model Thinking by the University of Michigan which both address these topics). A key aspect to dissemination of ideas and creativity is the structure of the network. Networks in which the individual members have more connections tend to be better at this. Two other key metrics that are important here are the average path length (how many steps are on average between two individuals in a network) and clustering (what fractions of my neighbours are connected with each other). These are all key in determining the successful transfer of information and the development of creative ideas.

Looking back at my situation, I see the things mentioned in the previous paragraph were in place. Both the online and offline networks grew steadily while I was part of them. Also, the interconnectedness between me and other members of the network increased and I became more connected to the connections of my friends. As a result of this

Conclusion

Networks are a powerful instrument when it comes to professional development. Being part of one (or more) networks helps to get new and more creative ideas for your personal (classroom) practice. However, being part of a network is not enough as not every network has a similar success rate. Degree, path length and clustering are useful parameters to determine the degree of success to which information and creativity is spread.

Bibliography

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