Social Media's Impact on Instruction: Beginning Teachers' Self-Directed Professional Learning [Pre-print]

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KEYWORDS

beginning teachers, early-career teachers, self-directed learning, professional learning networks, pedagogical content knowledge, social media

PURPOSE

BEGINNING TEACHERS face numerous challenges as they start their careers. Although social media offer new opportunities for teachers' ongoing professional learning through access to extra resources and broader expertise (Trust & Prestridge, 2021), these platforms also introduce new complications and challenges: beginning teachers must juggle more outlets for professional learning and potentially competing voices for what and how to teach. Through qualitative research, I explore social media's impact on beginning teachers' instructional practice.

PERSPECTIVES

PAST RESEARCH has conceptualized teachers' social media use as *professional learning networks* (PLNs). Teachers' PLNs can be understood as the interconnected tools, people, and spaces—spanning local and online contexts—they construct around themselves to improve their teaching and learning (Trust et al., 2016). The tools shared in PLNs may include knowledge, skills, instructional resources, curricular materials, and encouragement. Of particular interest, but currently under-explored, is the *pedagogical content knowledge* (Shulman, 1986) that teachers may access through their PLN and subsequent effects on instructional practice.

METHODS

THIS QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION follows a multiple-case study design, which offers both in-depth descriptions within each case as well as comparisons between cases (Yin, 2018). Participants were five teachers in their first or second year of employment. All taught science in the U.S.—two in middle school and three in high school. I collected data through eight weeks of diary entries and a series of five interviews with each participant in Spring 2022. I followed Saldaña's (2016) procedures for open-ended qualitative analysis of interview transcripts and diary entries. Through several coding cycles, I developed emergent codes drawn from the participants' words and synthesized these codes into themes.

RESULTS

PARTICIPANTS described expanding their PLNs through a social media ecosystem composed of spaces for *searching* (e.g., Google, Pinterest, TeachersPayTeachers.com, teacher blogs) and *following* (e.g., Facebook, TikTok). Beginning teachers used these spaces for professional learning

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related to *what* to teach (i.e., content) and *how* to teach (i.e., pedagogy). Although their contexts and experiences differed, participants described using social media for content learning related to ideas and inspiration, introducing new topics, and activities for practice or review. They also used social media for pedagogical learning related to designing lessons to work within time constraints and around disruptions, as well as making instruction more interesting and interactive. However, participants described numerous frustrations with these processes, including a lack of relevant resources for specific instructional needs or spam and self-promotion obscuring useful tools. In addition, participants did not describe using social media for higher-order learning related to increasing students' critical thinking or sensemaking in the science classroom.

SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE

THESE FINDINGS add to the knowledge base on beginning teachers' professional learning through social media. Although this qualitative study is not meant to speak to generalizable trends, participants' descriptions of social media use do offer new categories for understanding the possibilities and perils of self-directed professional learning. The results suggest a synthesized model through which teachers may intentionally use social media to develop pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and adapt their instructional practices.

FROM AUTHOR

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