RESEARCH ONLINE

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Education - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Social Sciences

2011

Online practice & offline roles: A cultural view of teachers' low engagement in online communities

Sarah Howard
University of Wollongong, sahoward@uow.edu.au

Jonathan McKeown

Publication Details

Howard, S. & McKeown, J. (2011). Online practice & offline roles: A cultural view of teachers' low engagement in online communities. American Educational Research Association

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Online practice & offline roles: A cultural view of teachers' low engagement in online communities

Sarah Howard
University of Wollongong

Jonathan McKeown
University of Tampa

An online community of practice (CoP) can extend teachers' professional interaction beyond their school, but these practices are often underutilized. Using cultural theory, this paper proposes that teachers' low engagement in online CoPs is that this "practice" is not part of their role as a teacher, individually or in their school culture. These ideas are examined through teachers' low engagement in an online CoP as part of a research project. Findings suggest that teachers saw the online community as part of their role in the project, not as part of their "offline" role as a classroom teacher. The discussion conjectures that together, through developing group values and beliefs, schools and research projects can make online CoPs relevant to teachers' practice.

Purpose

In Education, there is a desire to take advantage of social technologies to support teachers' professional development; online communities of practice are one of these technologies. Generally, teachers have not shown high levels of engagement in these spaces. Research has identified aspects of online communities requiring development for the space to be sustainable, such as meeting users' needs, users social capital, maintaining critical mass in the group, etc. (Farooq, Schank, Harris, Fusco, & Schlager, 2007). In this paper, we aim to explore teachers' low levels of engagement in online communities of practice in relation to these community aspects, through cultural theory (see Douglas, 1992). Cultural theory helps us to consider engagement in these spaces in relation to beliefs about the role of a teacher, as well as commitment to online groups and school culture.

We begin exploring these issues through an analysis of rural teachers' low engagement in an online community of practice, built using Sakai (http://sakaiproject.org/), as part of a longitudinal technology-focused research project. The discussion will specifically address engagement in the space, in relation to teachers' conceptions of online communities of practice as part of their role in a research project, as a classroom teacher, and as a member of school culture. We argue that a better understanding of the *offline* teacher role and the influence of school culture, in relation to the use of *online* communities of practice as part of the research project and support the integration of online communities into the daily teaching practice.

It should be emphasised that this paper does not intend to present a map or strategy for the development of online communities of practice. Rather, the discussion seeks to provide a way to think about the usefulness and application of online communities of practice, to improve teachers' engagement in these spaces. Specifically, how we can make the affordances of these communities relevant to teachers' and their practice.

Theoretical framework

Teacher learning is generally understood to take three forms: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, and knowledge-of-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These types can be translated as information about teaching, expertise in teaching, and experiences when teaching, respectively. Teachers' communities of practice are identified as spaces beyond the school's formal organizational structure that can provide useful ways for teachers to share and access these types of information, to support their professional development and learning (Young & Tseng, 2008).

A *community of practice* is a group of people sharing a common practice or domain of interest, which enables the community members to learn from one another by sharing issues, ideas, problems, and solutions (Young & Tseng, 2008, p. 56). These communities take on their own social norms and behaviours, as well as structure (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social relations in online communities situate individuals as group *members*. If individuals actively regard themselves as members in the social group they will exhibit a stronger sense of identity in the community, in which case they will further generate the collective good by exchanging their expertise and opinions (Tseng & Kuo, 2010, p. 1049).This discussion will focus on the community aspect of *membership* in online communities of practice. Specifically, how perceptions of membership relate to teachers conception of the teacher role and how this influences commitment to the group.

Cultural theory states that individuals will adopt the values and beliefs of their group culture (Douglas, 1992). Further, and to a certain extent, the group culture will define individual members' specific role and behaviour within the group. This is particularly true of hierarchical cultures which clearly define roles and provide minimal autonomy for members to change their roles (Rohrmann & Renn, 2000). As online communities of practice have their own social structure, the group would define individuals' roles and behavioural norms of the group. A challenge of these communities is maintaining group momentum and participation (Farooq, et al., 2007). Once individuals begin to lose momentum and engagement in the online community, their membership and identity within the community breaks down.

The aim of this paper is to explore ideas about group membership and engagement, through the analysis of teachers' experiences and participation in an online community of practice within a technology-related research project. Drawing from cultural theory, this paper theorizes that teachers' would not consider online communities of practice to be an integral part of their role as a teacher unless these practices were valued by the school culture. Teachers in the study were from schools with hierarchical cultures where the teacher role and behaviours would be defined by the culture (Howard & DeMeester, 2008). Teachers could understand the use of an online community of practice as part of their role as a participant in the research project, but this may not transfer over to their daily work as a teacher. Considering this possibility, it would be difficult to maintain teachers' engagement in the online space and a critical mass of participants to support the community of practice beyond the research project.

Context for analysis

To explore these ideas, we have begun a theoretical and thematic qualitative analysis of 36 teachers' experiences in a technology-focused research project, which was funded by a three-year Comprehensive School Reform grant from the National Science Foundation. The project included

teachers from eight schools, across three states, in the Southeastern United States. Teachers participating in the project were supplied with instructional technology such as laptops, interactive white boards, video conferencing equipment, and other technology identified by the schools. Teachers completed monthly progress reports outlining how they used technology in their teaching. Throughout each school year, project team members would visit the schools to conduct technology training and provide support.

Each summer (early June, 2007-2009), teachers were brought together for a one-week workshop at Florida State University. During each of the workshops teachers completed pre- and post-questionnaires about the workshop and the project. The questionnaires asked about their use of technology in teaching, pedagogy, engagement, and their participation. They also participated in semi-structured focus groups, based on school groups (3-5 teachers per school), with one of the researchers. Focus groups questions related to the use of technology, how teachers learn to use technology, and aspects of their school culture. Additionally, principals were invited to the summer workshops. It was thought that principals would be better prepared to provide leadership for participating teachers throughout the school year, as well as support aims of the research project, if they participated in the workshops.

As part of the project, teachers were introduced to two primary community communication practices: video conferencing and an online community of practice (built using Sakai). Both of these tools were introduced to teachers in the first year (2007). In the second year (2008), teachers were given an activity to familiarise themselves with the community of practice and the group discussed how they might use it over the school year to support professional development, curriculum development, and share teaching resources. Use of the online community space during the school year was not mandatory. Throughout the 2008-2009 school year, the researchers encouraged teachers to engage in the online community. One strategy was to have the teachers submit their monthly progress reports through the online community. Use of the online community of practice is analyzed through the number of logins to the space, activities completed, and focus group comments about using the online space.

Preliminary results & developing discussion

Two community communication tools were introduced to the group, but we will only focus on the online learning community, as there were considerable technical difficulties with video conferencing.

Early analysis of the online community space showed very low teacher engagement. During summer workshops, teachers were actively engaged in using the online community system both to complete research based tasks and activities related to teaching and professional development. These included identifying other teachers in similar domains, as well as providing access to domain content experts at the higher education level.

Once the workshops concluded use of the system dropped significantly, with most teachers accessing the system less than once per month and an average of 53% of the teachers failing to log into the system outside of workshops and training session provided by the researchers. More concerning was that part of the responsibilities of the project teachers was that they had to submit monthly reports online, and many failed to do so without constant reminders and then just simply emailing the reports to the researchers. With the teachers failing to even log into the system, the

opportunity for professional collaboration was minimal. To our knowledge, none of the teachers took advantage of the online community space to communicate with domain content experts even though this practice was encouraged on multiple occasions.

Preliminary analysis of focus group responses indicates that teachers were not consciously avoiding the online community space; they simply did not think to use it. Technologies such as the interactive white board and software supporting numeracy were heavily used, as the teachers saw a direct link to their teaching practice. They did not believe the online community of practice had a direct link to teaching; therefore, it had little value outside of the research project. These findings do not suggest that communities of practice could not be integrated into the teachers' understanding of their role as a teacher; it simply had not been integrated. Theoretically, if participation in a community of practice is valued in the school culture, teachers as members of that culture will adopt this value. This is particularly true of individuals in hierarchical cultures; most of the schools in this project were hierarchical cultures based on their leadership structure and clearly defined teacher roles (Howard & DeMeester, 2008).

The researchers did make an attempt to draw the aims of the project into the school culture, in two ways. First, more than one teacher participated in the project (3-5 teachers) from each school. Second, the project invited the school principals to the summer workshops. Both of these strategies were an attempt to draw the workshop activities into school cultures through developing common meaning between members. It is possible that the attempt to create links between the project and the schools undermined the development of legitimate connections between teachers at different schools. Teachers came to the research project with strong social bonds, so they were not motivated to form bonds between schools. This phenomenon would make it more difficult to develop inter-school social commitment in an online setting, when it did not exist in the offline setting.

The results presented in this proposal only show a preliminary analysis of teachers' engagement in online communities of practice. Further analysis on focus group responses will be conducted, examining teachers' specific conceptions of the online community of practice and how it links to their role as a teacher and as a participant in the research project. A better understanding of teachers' conceptions of these roles is necessary, to understand how commitment to the online community of practice can be developed through the research project and in the school. Specifically, it needs to be determined if participation in the online community of practice should be emphasised through teachers' role as a member of their school culture, a member of the research project, or a combination of the two.

Scholarly significance

Online communities of practice provide a way for teachers to broaden their professional knowledge through interaction with other teachers and educational experts, but teachers need to value this practice to take advantage of the benefits. They need to view this practice as part of their role as a teacher. Through an analysis of teachers' group commitment, researchers can gain a better understanding of how teachers view their role in the classroom, as members of school culture, and as online learners. Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes (2009) state that emerging research needs to understand the "possibilities and pitfalls" of social networking and software, which includes online

communities of practice, for teaching and learning. Examination of teachers' offline and online group commitment and their relative roles is part of this investigation.

References

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education*, 249-305.

Douglas, M. (1992). *Risk and blame: Essays in cultural theory*. London: Routledge.

Farooq, U., Schank, P., Harris, A., Fusco, J., & Schlager, M. (2007). Sustaining a community computing infrastructure for online teacher professional development: A case study of designing Tapped In. [10.1007/s10606-007-9049-0]. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work, 16*(4), 397-429.

Greenhow, C., Robelia, B., & Hughes, J. E. (2009). Web 2.0 and classroom research: What path should we take now? *Educational Researcher, 38*(4), 246-259.

Howard, S. K., & DeMeester, K. (2008). *Managing teacher risk-taking in ICT-related educational change.* Paper presented at the The Eighth International Conference on Knowledge, Culture and Change in Organisations, Cambridge, UK.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Rohrmann, B., & Renn, O. (2000). Risk perception research - An introduction. In O. Renn, and Rohrmann B. (Ed.), *Cross-cultural risk perceptions: A survey of empirical studies* (Vol. 13, pp. 11-54). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Tseng, F.-C., & Kuo, F.-Y. (2010). The way we share and learn: An exploratory study of the self-regulatory mechanisms in the professional online learning community. [doi: DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2010.03.005]. *Computers in Human Behavior, 26*(5), 1043-1053.

Young, M.-L., & Tseng, F.-C. (2008). Interplay between physical and virtual settings for online interpersonal trust formation in knowledge-sharing practice. *CyberPsychology & Behaviour, 11*(1), 55-64.