Building Capacity for Teacher Learning and Leadership in an Online Professional Learning Community: Exploring TeachOntario

Educators are increasingly taking to digital media to support their professional learning and development as they connect with colleagues from within their own education systems and beyond (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hur & Bush, 2009). TeachOntario was officially launched in March 2016 providing Ontario educators with a digital space “to support sharing, collaboration, and knowledge exchange amongst educators across Ontario” (TVOntario News, 2016). Educators involved in Ontario’s Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (see Campbell, Lieberman & Yashkina, 2016) have been central figures in the design and evolution of TeachOntario in the years prior to its official launch. This paper presents findings from a two-year, multi-method study that focused on the ways in which Ontario teachers were engaging TeachOntario to support and share their learning within the context of the TLLP program. As digital media become more frequently used tools by educators’, it is important that we build our understanding of how digital media facilitate professional learning. Developing teachers’ professional capital is critical to building capacity for educational change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This study contributes to knowledge building about how online professional learning communities are advancing that agenda.

This descriptive case study (Yin, 2013) used a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this paper we report the overall findings from three data sets: 1) social network data examining the patterns of interaction within the tlpcreate network; 2) survey data about educators’ perceptions and use of the digital platform; and 3) interviews with active users of TeachOntario. Social network data were analysed using centralization measures to examine the patterns of interaction between TLLP educators. Content analysis methods (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) were used to analyse the content of these interactions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey data and a holistic coding procedure (Saldaña, 2013) was applied to the interview data to identify emergent themes and key issues.

The social network findings showed that there was low levels of activity within the TLLP groups. The survey findings suggested that navigability issues and information overwhelm may have played a role in the low levels of activity across the groups as a whole. However, in groups that were active, participants came from across the province showing evidence of knowledge diffusion within the context of individual TLLP projects. Social network findings highlighted key cases where TeachOntario was used more frequently. Interviews with these teacher leaders revealed that TeachOntario was an integral part of their TLLP learning journey and their experience within the digital space helped build their confidence and lead them to recognize their own knowledge and expertise. These teachers felt that TeachOntario was central to their development because it enabled them to make their learning visible to their colleagues within their group and across the province. Active participation—an intentional focus on using TeachOntario in deliberate ways to document and share learning—was central to success.
References


