

Teacher Candidates and Twitter: Learning With iMentors

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Abstract

This case study illustrates the value of using Twitter as a professional learning tool to create Personal Learning Networks (PLN) in a graduate level elementary methods course in the areas of science and social studies. Over the course of 3 semesters, 35 master level teacher licensure candidates' written reflections and forum posts were analyzed regarding the implementation of learning with *iMentors*, also known as virtual mentors. One goal of integrating iMentors into the course was to help the teacher candidates gain firsthand experience observing how science and social studies are taught in elementary classrooms. As a result of incorporating iMentors into the course, not only did the teacher candidates observe both contents being taught, they also actively participated in learning beyond four classroom walls with a global network of educators via social media.

Introduction

While teaching an elementary science and social studies methods course, a pattern emerged that the teacher candidates were not observing lessons in these two disciplines. To address this issue, each teacher candidate was paired with an iMentor, a connected educator who networks with other like-minded educators, via social media. A connected educator is one "who is constructing knowledge, collaborating, and interacting with professionals all over the world and developing networks to deepen understanding" (Wong, 2013, p. 33).

Connected educators and iMentors view learning beyond the classroom walls and seek out opportunities to expand learning with their PLN. This case study illustrates that teacher education programs should integrate iMentors into teacher preparation programs. Additionally, this study also seeks to answer the question, "How do teacher education programs provide teacher candidates with opportunities to learn with iMentors in order to expand their Personal Learning Network (PLN)?"

This case study presents data gathered and analyzed from teacher candidates' written reflections and forum posts over three fall semesters (2011, 2012 and 2013). The results

suggest that learning with iMentors and a PLN enhances field experiences, models best practices, and creates a global network to support teacher candidates and new teachers. The results also reveal the teacher candidates' fears and uncertainty about using social media and further illustrate the need for a larger scale study to continue to investigate the use of social media, iMentors, and PLNs in teacher education programs.

Literature Review: Social Media Paradigm Shift

The onset of social media and social networking sites has revolutionized how individuals connect, communicate, collaborate, and learn in the 21st century. Even though teacher candidates come to college campuses already programmed and networked with social media, there is little research in higher education on how learning through connections and networks create change (Kezar, 2014). This paradigm shift in using social media, particularly Twitter in teacher preparation, is a relatively new concept (Curran & Chatel, 2013; Kezar, 2014).

Besides Twitter being a relatively new concept in teacher education, its use has focused on teacher candidates using Twitter to support the learning in either a particular course or practicum experience. For example, a study by Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser (2013) surveyed how undergraduate and graduate students in three technology classes perceived Twitter as a classroom tool. Initially 34 students agreed to participate in the study, but only 14 students completed all requirements. The participants were asked to create a Twitter account, follow each other on Twitter, follow the class hashtag, and send at least 75 tweets during the semester. The majority of tweets sent by the participants were either related to personal topics or informational items. Personal topics included homework issues, location, health, mood, and opinions. Informational tweets included web links about education or technology. Some frustrations were reported by the participants about the unfamiliarity on how to use Twitter, as well as the amount of non-class related tweets to read. The study also revealed that students did not use Twitter as a collaboration tool and enjoyed being consumers of tweets, but seldom replied or retweeted.

In another case study, Wright (2011) examined eight teacher candidates pursuing a secondary teaching license during their practicum experience. The teacher candidates posted to Twitter as a way to self-reflect during the practicum. The study examined the value of using Twitter to initiate and develop self-reflection skills during the practicum. The participating group of graduate students (4 females and 4 males) volunteered to be a part of the study. None of the graduate students had used Twitter before and a closed Twitter group was established for the purposes of this study. The participants were expected to send three tweets daily in response to their practicum experience.

After the practicum concluded, the participants met as a focus group to discuss their Twitter experience. The participants tweeted 494 times over the 7-week practicum. Although one graduate student tweeted 94 times, the average was about 60 tweets per person. Forty-nine tweets focused on curriculum and planning, 123 tweets on pedagogy, and 175 tweets concentrated around reflection. As the participants progressed through the practicum, the content of their tweets changed from what they did to how and why. This case study suggests that the eight participants used Twitter in a closed and private Twitter group as both a reflective and collaborative learning tool. As a result of the closed group, the teacher candidates were not exposed to a global network of educators.

The literature review reveals that the research in the use of Twitter in teacher education needs to be further explored. Cooke (2012) explained the value of Twitter: “The power of Twitter is not Twitter itself; it’s the connections it facilitates. Those connections can break the sense of professional isolation that many teachers feel within the walls of their own schools while reinvigorating their lesson plans by exposing them to a daily global idea exchange” (p. 20). The combination of Twitter, iMentors, and PLNs as a part of professional preparation for teacher candidates, new teachers, and second career teacher candidates further supports learning through virtual connections and networks (Greenhouse & Gleason, 2012). However, research is mute on the following question: How can the combination of Twitter, iMentors and PLNs help prepare teacher candidates?

iMentors and a PLN?

The iMentor Model defined by Curran and Chatel (2013) linked teacher candidates with connected educators virtually through social media. The use of iMentors in teacher education expands field experiences beyond local classrooms/schools and includes a global perspective through a variety of social media applications. The 2013 study revealed that the most effective iMentor was a master teacher, a connected educator, knowledgeable of content, willing to share and collaborate with a PLN, and serve as a catalyst for learning pedagogy and content.

The term Personal Learning Network (PLN) has been a part of educational technology for more than ten years (Downes, 2009). According to Johnson (2013), a PLN is defined as a “self-created set of experts, colleagues, and resources...that meet one’s daily learning needs” (p. 84). McLeod (2011) highlights the importance of connections and relationships in a blog post, *If You Were on Twitter*:

Because you’re *not* on Twitter, what you don’t realize is that *Twitter is the back fence you share with your neighbors. Except your neighbors are people all over the world...*Every day you have a chance to learn from these online

neighbors. Every day you have a chance to receive resources that you otherwise never would have found.

To create a PLN, the focus needs to be more than just following people and sharing links and resources; the real power of a PLN is the conversations and collaborative opportunities (Nussbaum-Beach, 2013).

Using iMentors and PLNs in Teacher Preparation

The implementation of iMentors into this elementary methods course enhanced the field experience and provided the teacher candidates an opportunity to view teaching and learning through global connections and networks. Through the use of Twitter, the teacher candidates gained these global connections and networks by learning with the iMentors. Each teacher candidate was paired with an iMentor as a resource for additional (virtual) field experiences. The iMentors were available through Twitter, Skype, email, and phone.

This case study analyzes teacher candidates' perspectives of learning with iMentors and their PLN from three fall semesters (2011, 2012 and 2013). The participants were 35 teacher candidates, 31 females and 4 males. Only 1 out of the 35 participants refused to collaborate with an iMentor through social media; 2 participants opened private Twitter accounts, and 31 participants collaborated with their iMentors publically on Twitter.

The iMentors volunteered in response to a blog post request on Twitter, and the original list of iMentors from 2011 included seven from the New England area, three from Canada, and three from other areas in the United States (Louisiana, Hawaii, and South Carolina). As the course progressed, more educators on Twitter requested to be part of the iMentor experience and joined the course from classrooms in Chicago, Massachusetts, Ohio, Tennessee, and Calgary. As a result, the original iMentors continued to participate in 2012 and 2013 semesters, as well as other connected educators from Texas, Georgia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Canada. Additionally, each week one or more iMentors Skyped and tweeted the teacher candidates enrolled in the methods course.

Between the teacher candidates and the multiple iMentors, the classroom environment focused on the intrapersonal aspects of learning and helped support a collaborative learning environment. As a result, the teacher candidates were more willing to take risks and go beyond the requirements on the syllabus. A common theme emerged in the written reflections, the implementation of iMentors was a transformative component in completing field experiences.

Discussion

The power of having a PLN as an integral part of a methods course indicates the importance of experiencing teaching and learning with iMentors and global networks via social media. Through Skype and Twitter, the iMentors offered a view of a connected classroom, modeled exemplary science and social studies lessons, and provided opportunities for the teacher candidates to observe elementary students actively engaged in networked learning via social media. In written narratives and forum posts, the teacher candidates consistently reflected that the iMentors were lead learners who were available and willing to learn with the teacher candidates. Furthermore, the iMentors were described as models for teaching and learning through a global network of resources and connections. For example, one teacher candidate reflected on the positive influence of the iMentor experience in this way, “We were able to Skype with educators from around the country, or the world for that matter, who started out just like us, as students. These educators were quick to give us advice, answer our questions, show us what it looks like, talk to their students, and even share valuable resources with us.”

Emerging patterns indicated that the teacher candidates valued learning with their iMentors. A teacher candidate reflected, “It really is incredible that someone [iMentor] I don’t know took the time to help someone they’ve never met [face to face].” Another teacher candidate stated, “I loved hearing from all the different people who have Skyped into our classroom. I view all of the people that Skyped into our classroom as my iMentors. Their warmth, reflection, wealth of knowledge, interest in helping other educators, and all around advice was nothing I’ve ever experienced.” These reflections reinforce that having an active PLN prior to student teaching provides teacher candidates a community and supportive network.

Embedding iMentors into this methods course began as an idea to address local field experiences not consistently teaching science or social studies lessons and quickly developed into a model for connected learning. A candidate reflected:

This class truly helped to show me that there really is a community of teachers, who are also learners, who care and want to share. I smile to think that these teachers are out there, ready to share their knowledge and experience and advice. It is not just about teaching but about humanity, and I am thankful for the kindness of these teachers we met on Skype. Our classroom Skype sessions were very beneficial for me, without them I would not have been aware of the vast world of resources that exist online and through others.

The implementation of iMentors provided a view of both science and social studies being taught in elementary classrooms across the country, as well as a global perspective to teaching and learning that local field experiences cannot guarantee. Additionally, the iMentors provided continuous support and guidance for the teacher candidates, answered

questions and gave advice, as well as introduced the teacher candidates to PLN resources and Twitter chats specific to elementary teaching. Furthermore, incorporating iMentors into this methods course demonstrates that education in the 21st century allows us to be globally interconnected in the ways we teach and learn. Teacher candidates who establish a PLN during their teacher preparation are prepared to meet the diverse needs of a networked generation of students and additionally answers the question that this case study sought to answer.

Common Roadblocks

The teacher candidates in this study had similar concerns and roadblocks to the unfamiliarity of using Twitter as indicated in the literature review. Comfort level in using social media was an indicator on the success of collaborating with an iMentor, as well as creating and learning with a PLN. In their written narratives, the teacher candidates consistently reflected on fear, lack of experience, and time as roadblocks to using Twitter to connect with their iMentors and build their PLN. For example, a candidate reflected, "At first, I found Twitter nerve-wracking, but now I feel comfortable coming out of my lurker shell and have found the interconnectivity of Twitter shockingly easy to use." Another teacher candidate stated, "I still do not tweet myself, but I do like searching for new ideas and resources using hashtags." Frustration with a 140-character limitation and time of the Twitter chats were also listed as a common roadblock. Weekly Twitter chats for specific grades, content, and topics are held once a week for an hour at a predetermined time. These chats happen seven days a week and accommodate global time zones. Being silent during a chat and not tweeting also seemed to be a common theme as expressed by this teacher candidate, "I did not participate in the Twitter chats because I felt too inexperienced, but did find the chats helpful." These perceived roadblocks further support the need to address the anxiety and fear that adult learners manifest in their apprehension to social media.

Conclusion

This research, unlike that which exists, discusses the use of Twitter in collaboration with iMentors. Current research focuses on Twitter being used in a closed/private Twitter group and in isolation without the personal relationship and mentorship offered by iMentors. The combination of Twitter, iMentors, and Personal Learning Networks (PLN) provide a unique format for content delivery and mentorship for teacher candidates to learn, communicate, connect, and collaborate with educators throughout the world, virtually flattening the walls of our classrooms. The outcomes from this case study provide some recommendations for teacher education programs to utilize iMentors as part of the formal preparation and field experiences for new teachers. Thus, future research should consider how the use of Twitter, iMentors, and PLNs will influence and support practicum experiences, student teaching, as well as the first year of teaching. Using the new teacher hashtag, #ntchat, should be considered as an integral

component to building a PLN in teacher preparation programs. Future research should also focus on how connecting and collaborating with iMentors enhances teaching, curriculum, and instruction. Teacher education programs implementing iMentors would prepare teacher candidates to become connected educators, who in turn would support teaching and learning through global networks in future classrooms.

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