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Pinterest: Pins, Problems, and Possibilities

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Abstract

Preservice teacher candidates were surveyed regarding their Pinterest usage when planning. The types of materials they pin and the frequency of how often they use different resources were measured. The results indicated that the most common uses of Pinterest by preservice teachers were finding ideas related to student engagement and active learning. They like using Pinterest for inspiration, appreciate the creative activities, and like the ability to see what other teachers are doing. Concerns regarding the validity and lack of research base for many Pinterest resources and the need to help teacher candidates evaluate resources and their appropriateness for use in a standards-based classroom are addressed.

Pinterest is a popular social media platform which acts as a digital scrapbook where users can save or “pin” material from the Internet on a wide variety of topics from cooking and gardening to flyfishing and hunting. The platform allows visitors to search, save, and organize online resources and share information with others (Mull & Lee, 2014). Since being launched in 2010, it is the fastest-growing website in history, reaching 10 million unique monthly visitors in the United States more quickly than any other standalone social media site (Constine, 2012). As of 2017, the site had more than 175 million total users (Carpenter, Cassaday, & Monti, 2018) and surpassed both email and Facebook for use as a sharing medium (Meng, 2019). Professional literature providing suggestions for how teachers can effectively utilize social media resources such as Pinterest are becoming more commonplace. Some of the topics being written about include utilizing Pinterest to increase student engagement and differentiation (Giebelhausen, 2015), expanding personal learning networks (Herbert, 2012), and using literature in the classroom (Baker, 2013).

Although much has been written about how teachers can use Pinterest, little empirical evidence is available, and even less is available regarding the Pinterest usage of preservice teachers. Therefore, this exploratory study was conducted to investigate the following questions: (1) How often do preservice teachers look for different types of educational resources on Pinterest (e.g. science experiments, literature reviews, etc.)?, and (2) What types of education related activities

(e.g. network with other teachers, organize and store ideas, etc.) do preservice teachers participate in?

Literature Review

A 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that approximately 73% of online adults were using social networking sites (Duggan & Smith, 2013) and that Pinterest was the social media site with the largest increase of users that year when compared to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Twenty-six percent of all U.S. adults report using Pinterest (Pew Research Center, 2016), and it is especially popular with the education community. Sixty-nine percent of teachers report using it for their classrooms (Devaney, 2016).

Pinterest is frequented by teachers because they can easily create pinboards where they can post, pin, and group educational resources online. A study by the RAND Corporation found that 86% of elementary and 63% of secondary teachers report using Pinterest when planning lessons (Opfer, Kaufman, & Thompson, 2016). When searching the Internet for teaching ideas and materials, Pinterest posts are among the most common resources available (Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014). There are over 500,000 education pins pinned daily (Jarvis, 2013) enabling teachers to easily supplement their textbooks and curriculum with up-to-date materials and ideas (Hooks, 2015). Social media sites such as Pinterest provide teachers with “a convenient and powerful venue for teachers to connect to one another” (Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014, p. 37). Although Pinterest’s popularity within the educational community is undisputed, research regarding how teachers use Pinterest is very limited. There have been a few studies related to best practice using Pinterest (Hansen, Nowlan, & Winter, 2012), why people use Pinterest (Gilbert, Bakhshi, Chang, & Terveen, 2013), and what people pin (Hall & Zarro, 2013). However, there is very little research looking at how teachers can or do use Pinterest for planning. Research regarding teacher candidates’ use of Pinterest is even more rare. Because of this, this study looked at teacher candidates’ use of Pinterest while planning.

Theoretical Framework

This study was influenced by the connectivist theory. Goldie (2016) explains that, “in connectivism the starting point for learning occurs when knowledge is actuated by learners connecting to and participating in a learning community.” These learning communities consist of people with similar interests that want to participate in opportunities to dialogue and think about related topics with others who may be more knowledgeable or have different experiences or perspectives (Siemens, 2005). The connectivist theory acknowledges the benefits of technology for learning in this Web 2.0 era. Many “learners are learning through their connections, constructions, and communications of those knowledge constructions to those in their social connections or networks. Digital learning is about connections, not about isolated learning.” This is an important realization for teacher educators. Bell (2011) explains that “theories of learning based solely on assumptions of students being taught by teachers, usually in a classroom, do not provide an adequate framework for us to think and act in the digitally saturated and connected world in which we live” (p. 100). Therefore, we must understand the use and benefits of online technologies while preparing teacher candidates who will undoubtedly turn to the internet at times for planning during their time as preservice teachers and in the years beyond as they begin their teaching careers.

Methods

Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018 in order to compare similarities and differences among participants' use of Pinterest and provide a deeper understanding of responses. Participants completed a 45-question survey through Qualtrics, an online survey provider. The survey was designed to test assertions made by researchers in the professional literature regarding preservice and inservice teachers' use of Pinterest that were not based on empirical data. Participants first received an introductory letter via Qualtrics providing information about informed consent and discussed issues related to privacy and security. Participants who agreed to participate were directed to a three-part survey with a total of 43 multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. First, respondents were asked demographic questions regarding their Education major, whether they have a Pinterest account, etc. Second, they were asked to identify the frequency they look for different types of educational resources on Pinterest (e.g. science experiments, literature reviews, etc.) and how often they use Pinterest to do a variety of education related activities (e.g. network with other teachers, organize and store ideas, etc.). Responses regarding frequency were recorded using a five-point Likert scale including never, infrequently, sometimes, frequently, and very frequently. The third section of the survey included open-ended questions asking respondents to identify benefits they found utilizing Pinterest for their instructional planning.

Demographics

A total of 170 teacher candidates in the Education department of a small liberal arts college in the Midwest were invited to participate in the current study on preservice teachers' Pinterest usage for planning. Ninety-two teacher candidates completed the survey, representing a 54% response rate. Only teacher candidates who indicated having a Pinterest account were included in the study. Seventy-eight teacher candidates indicated that they did have a Pinterest account, representing 85% of the respondents. The teacher candidates who responded represented a variety of Education programs. A majority of teacher candidates (48%) use Pinterest for planning one day a week, while 42% use it two to three days, and 10% use it four or more days per week.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze and report the percentage of teacher candidates who accessed particular resources on Pinterest in order to clearly represent response data. The open-ended qualitative data that was collected was coded for themes that emerged. Descriptors were written to detail what was to be included in each of the domains identified based on a second-cycle of coding.

Results

Results of this study are designed to convey ways in which preservice teachers utilize Pinterest while planning. Specifically, frequency of preservice teachers' use of Pinterest to look for ideas and their frequency for utilizing Pinterest to do a variety of education related activities were studied. Following the results is a discussion of Pinterest usage, possible pitfalls, and future possibilities for Pinterest use by pre-service teachers.

Preservice Teachers' Frequency Looking for Resources on Pinterest

Preservice teachers reported utilizing Pinterest to find a wide variety of resources. Many report frequently using Pinterest to get materials to increase student engagement and active learning [hands-on activities (67%), individual activities (67%), game ideas (65%), project ideas (55%), and art projects (53%)]. They also use Pinterest for classroom display ideas (55%) and often pin content related to the subjects of math (53%) and Language Arts (49%).

It is interesting to note that while teacher candidates frequently use Pinterest for content related to Language Arts and math, very few report frequently using it to find content related to social science (15%) or science (24%). It is unclear whether this is because Pinterest is a more valuable resource for Language Arts and math or if this is due to the comparatively limited amount of time many teachers spend teaching science and social studies.

Pinterest describes itself as “the world’s catalog of ideas”, and that seems to be the most common way teacher candidates are utilizing it beyond finding resources [organize / store ideas (74%)]. A vast majority of teacher candidates surveyed seem to infrequently or never use Pinterest to interact with others [create class pages (69%), share resources with classmates (54%), network with teachers (82%), collaborate with teachers (86%), or read teacher blogs (52%)] or for professional development [learn about issues related to education (64%) and access professional development (77%)]. Also, most preservice teachers are not using Pinterest to share their work with others [post lesson plans / activities (77%)].

The open-ended survey responses regarding benefits of Pinterest were coded to identify themes utilizing an open coding approach in accordance with established guidelines (Creswell, 2005). Regarding the benefits of Pinterest, teacher candidates reported getting inspiration and using Pinterest ideas as a “springboard”, enjoying the creativity of resources, and learning from other teachers as the main benefits of using Pinterest. Many teacher candidates shared they use Pinterest to help get started when planning lessons. One example of this is, “I enjoy using it to find inspiration. I tend to not copy the actual piece, but use it more as a base to creating my own project/lesson.”

Creativity of the activities available was also frequently cited as a benefit of Pinterest. As explained “Pinterest always seems to have perfect, creative activities that look better than what I try and create.” Another candidate shared “I have found extremely creative ways to teach a concept, something that I may have never otherwise thought of.”

Being able to learn from teachers beyond their field placements was also frequently cited as a benefit. A good example of this is the comment:

I like to be able to see what creative ideas other teachers and educators have developed and implemented in their classrooms and what has worked well for them. I feel that it helps me take my instruction up a notch and helps make the classroom environment more engaging. I like that it feels like a community of teachers sharing their ideas and successes with one another.

Discussion

A majority of the teacher candidates surveyed use Pinterest while planning. The most common uses of Pinterest seem to be finding ideas related to encouraging student engagement and active learning (finding hands-on activities, games, projects, and art projects). However, classroom display ideas and content related to math and Language Arts are also often pinned. Teacher candidates frequently utilize Pinterest due to its ease of use, creative ideas, and the ability to learn from others. It provides numerous opportunities to share resources, network with others, and for professional development. However, the preservice teacher candidates in this study did not typically utilize it for those purposes.

Although Pinterest is easy to use and provides a plethora of education related materials, researchers, administrators, and teacher educators have expressed concerns regarding preservice and inservice teachers' use of Pinterest for planning because that there is no "vetting" or quality control process related to what is posted (Carpenter, Abrams, & Dunphy, 2016). This is especially of concern for teacher candidates because many may assume that lessons that are posted are based on best practice without further research or inquiry (Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014). Another issue is that pins often do not link back to the primary source used in the posting, therefore limiting the user's ability to modify or extend the activity or lesson based on the original content or to assess its' research foundation (Messner, 2012). Another significant concern is that researchers have found that many of the resources on Pinterest designed to teach content areas such as mathematics contain errors. In fact, in a recent study of Pinterest resources related to negative integers, researchers found that roughly one-third of the pins studied had mathematical errors (Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017).

Although it may seem best to advise teacher candidates to avoid Pinterest while planning, the news about Pinterest is not all bad. Lim, Son, & Kim found that teacher candidates produced more effective lesson plans when they chose to modify preexisting lesson plans than plan from scratch. They also reported higher self-efficacy (2018). So, it seems as though allowing teacher candidates to utilize online resources during planning does have some benefits. However, it is important for teacher preparation programs to discuss with teacher candidates ways to evaluate and validate, with research backing, activities found online (VanOverbeke & Stefanick, 2016). Therefore, teacher candidates can learn to look beyond cute activities (Cleaver & Wood, 2018) and choose high quality resources and ideas that are based on the best practices that are required for effective teaching in today's classrooms (TuckerSmith, 2017).

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