Emergent Learning Communities as Seedbeds for “Best Practices”:
Uncovering Insights from Teacher-Practitioner Blogs

Purpose
An aphorism that most teachers are aware of is pedagogy first, tools second. Yet amidst a continually changing educational technology landscape, many teachers feel considerably challenged when it comes to locating the most appropriate technological tool for the pedagogical task at hand. In addition, effective implementation of new social media tools requires teachers to reframe teaching and learning in the form of “best practices” that employ new digital media and literacies. This aspect is particularly crucial given various requirements for teachers to design and develop digital age learning and assessments (ISTE, 2008) as well as foster critical new media literacy skills in children and youth (Jenkins, 2009).

How can teachers respond to this professional development challenge? One way is through developing Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) (Richardson and Mancabelli, 2011), which can allow one to move beyond just making connections and instead focus on collaboratively creating new knowledge via blogs and other network technologies. In a sense these PLNs serve as spaces for building knowledge and articulating learning and reflection. For teachers seeking to make sense of the challenges associated with this new ed-tech landscape, PLNs can serve as a kind of persistent, ongoing Professional Development Workshop that transcends the limitations of time and geography.

In this study, we examine how in-class blogs of a learning technologies course designed for teacher-practitioners may provide the seeds for cultivating such networks. In particular, we look at how blogs help teachers with making sense of these new tools and developing best practices. Our primary research question was:

- What concerns and questions are most prevalent in participants’ blogs regarding integration of social media in learning and teaching?

A secondary analytical question was to examine how these discussions connect to best practices and standards identified in the ISTE Standards for Teachers.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical perspective guiding this study was Scardamalia and Bereiter’s (2006) Knowledge Building. They advocate for designing a learning environment that encourages students to move away from being passive learners to active “inquirers” (active knowledge building). Their framework describes knowledge building in terms of six themes such as community-centered, process oriented and “emergent.” Blogs have successfully been used in education for supporting reflection and externalization of thinking (Garmon, 2001; Oravec,
2002). Specifically, in studies of blogs in pre-service teacher courses, Wall, Anderson & Justice (2014) used blogs to help pre-service science teachers build their awareness of relevant pedagogical practices and processes. Cakir (2013) found blogs effective in promoting engagement among pre-service mathematics teachers. Thus, blogs have potential to not only uncover and display one’s thinking, but also to connect and engage with bloggers with similar interests (Efimova & de Moor, 2005). We built on these two pedagogical ideas as the main design of our intervention.

Research Methods

This study examines data from an existing online course on emerging technologies and learning. Most participants are K-12 teachers, while others design or teach in higher education, professional development, or organizational contexts. A significant component of interaction in this online course is the use of blogs to discuss texts and resources, and the blog data were used as the main data source for our analyses. In general, the posts were written in response to a variety of structured prompts provided by the instructor, such as: “How is learning presumed to occur within the context of Web 2.0?” and “What are the differences in the role of the learner and the facilitator as compared to 'traditional' learning environments?”

To answer our research questions, we used Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) as our primary analytical strategy to identify emergent codes, categories, and themes. Data for the study encompassed 26 teacher-practitioner blogs from two academic semesters (Spring 2014, Summer 2014). Data from the spring semester consisted of a total of 12 blogs with approximately 110 posts and 120 comments while the summer consisted of 13 blogs with approximately 130 posts and 140 comments.

Results

Our data analyses are ongoing, but we present here some of the initial findings relating to the first question. Our data revealed concerns or challenges that centered around three emergent themes:

1. Venturing beyond known boundaries
2. Accepting changes in teacher roles
3. Establishing infrastructure and training

After introducing each of these themes, we provide brief excerpts from different blog posts, followed by an analysis and then a statement of which ISTE Teacher Standard (2008) this data meaningfully reflects.

Theme 1: Venturing beyond known boundaries
Integrating “Social Web” technologies into learning environments means more than just making the tools available (Thomas & Brown, 2011; Davidson, 2013). These tools create new
possibilities and options for students to create, remix, and comment on each other’s work in ways that may not be entirely anticipated or controlled. Understandably, embracing the creative possibilities suggested by this more distributed learning environment also means that teachers need to acknowledge a certain degree of anxiety about the overall success of learning these new tools and implementing them in the classroom.

Examples
1.1. > “… many teachers are scared to try new websites or apps that would involve more technology. We need to take risks like we ask our students to, and try new resources. Balance and reflection go hand in hand, after trying new resources we need to reflect and ask if our students learned what we wanted them to …”

1.2 > “Until I started taking the classes needed to acquire my technology degree, I was one of those people that thought the word “learning” was something that you had to do in a classroom. I am “learning” quickly that this is not the case. … I am constantly learning new ways to incorporate technology into my elementary classroom.”

1.3 > “This is why it is important for the teacher to first explore these tools and become familiar with them first, before employing them in the classroom…”

Analysis
In all three examples the teachers-practitioners point to the necessity of venturing beyond what they know both in terms of tools and resources, and as well their constructs/images of learning, as identified in the second example. In the first example, the teacher-practitioner points to the anxiety that can come with manning “more technology,” but at the same time argues that teachers cannot expect students to use the learning challenges associated with these new tools, if teachers do not themselves demonstrate that same willingness.

Overall, in thinking about the broader significance of these blog excerpts, we see them as examples of discussions that resonate with the goals outlined in ISTE Standards for Teachers #1: “Facilitate and inspire student learning and creativity.” In particular, Standard 1a urges teachers to “[p]romote, support and model creative and innovative thinking and inventiveness.”

Theme 2: Accepting changes in teacher roles
An important change brought about by “Social Web” technologies is the shift from knowledge acquisition to network navigation, that is, learning how to navigate and build learning networks (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011; Ito, 2009), with teachers and researchers increasingly acknowledging network navigation as a crucial 21st century skill. Within their blog posts, some students blogged about the need to shift the orientation of the learning environment from acquiring knowledge where the teacher was the sole source of helpful knowledge, to one that supported facilitating knowledge among groups or networks of peers.
Examples

2.1 > “On Youtube there are millions of tutorials on practically any subject you can imagine. This really changes the teacher/student dynamics. Anyone can be a “facilitator” of learning. … These shifts can change how we think about designing learning environments. … ”

2.2 > > “But in May, I showed my students this blog [her course blog]; how we read articles during the week, write our own blogs, then comment on others. They instantly made the connection that what they had done all year. They couldn’t believe what their teacher was doing at night, and I think it’s important that they see us using technology for us as adults to grow and learn too. One of the best teaching practices is modeling, and this would be the perfect example of a teacher literally doing what is expected of her students”

2.3 > “Information is readily available via the net and the opportunity to respond spans 24hrs a day. Being cognisant [sic] of those changes, the role of the facilitator must change. Instructors of courses must now select from multimedia available, material for students to consider, provide guidance and facilitate discussion.”

Analysis

In these blog excerpts, the teacher-practitioners identify and adopt new perspectives on the role of the teacher. In the first and third example, the bloggers explicitly describe the impact of Web 2.0 tools as shifting learner-teacher dynamics and underscoring the transition of teachers from knowledge disseminators to knowledge facilitators. The bloggers also connect these ideas to their own work in the course, reflecting both on their own engagement in such learning as well as the ability to model networked learning for students and thereby making it a visible learning object.

We see these blog excerpts as intersecting with the goals outlined in ISTE Teacher Standard #3, Promoting Networked Learning Perspectives,” and especially those identified in 3d: “Model and facilitate effective use of current and emerging digital tools to locate, analyze, evaluate, and use information resources to support research and learning.”

Theme 3: Establishing infrastructure and training

The third major theme that emerged from the data was the need to address adequate infrastructure and training to support new types of learning initiatives. The practitioner-teachers in our course described the need to provide adequate funding for training and to develop relevant policies that were flexible enough to change with the times.

Examples

3.1 > “While Web 2.0 can be responsible for creating a network of young leaders, there are many variables that need to be addressed before this can take place. I work in a district that has
a median income of $48,000. This poses a problem for many families who do not have the resources at home to allow for their children to become part of that network community.”

3.2 > “For myself and the other social network neophytes training will be essential. … Administrators need to model, support, provide tools, and provide training to make technology based initiatives successful. Additionally, they need to craft school code that will allow many of these new tools and collaboration possibilities available for teachers and students.”

Analysis
The first example directs attention to the impact of economic decisions and financial commitments in promoting effective use of new tools and platforms. The second example suggests that schools and school leaders cannot afford to view training and support as an optional luxury. The third example recognizes the complexity of this challenge, but also suggests that Web 2.0 tools or similarly designed platforms may help to manage it.

Among the three themes, this one was where teachers’ language was most direct and their conversations seemed to underscore the relevance and value of ISTE Standard #5: “Engage in professional growth and leadership.”

Educational Importance

While many teachers might be aware of the potential of social web technologies, there is considerable question about how they might be employed in practice. These technologies raise numerous questions and challenges relating to cost, implementation, training and evaluation, and these challenges are augmented among teachers with little familiarity or access to these tools. How does this constituency of teachers begin to make sense of these challenges as a means toward developing a body of best practices? This study aimed to answer this question by examining teacher-practitioner blogs in an emerging learning technologies course. Initial data analyses suggest that teachers’ conversations generally coalesced around three areas: Venturing beyond known boundaries, accepting changes in teacher roles, and establishing infrastructure and training. Our analysis further revealed that each of these three themes reflected elements of specific standards outlined in the ISTE Teacher Standards. We will continue to analyze data and identify additional trends and themes in the final paper for this conference.
References


