From Not-working to Node-working: Designing a Professional Learning Network

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Abstract

The space and pace of learning is changing. Traditional professional learning and development courses – with defined content in a set place and time – are arguably not working for many, as they are linked to outmoded approaches to learning. As societies have evolved from an *industrial,* to *information* and then *social-age,* we have shifted our understandings of learning and teaching. This shift is from disseminating information in formal institutions, towards open access to knowledge via the web. Current notions appreciate that learning is continual through our interconnections with others, as we co-create, communicate and collaborate. The shifts to conceptualising learning as open, continuous and social has a flow on effect of disrupting how we conceptualise professional identity development, and ongoing professional learning. Professional learning increasingly involves co-constructing knowledge with others in learning networks across different contexts and time. New technologies such as digital badging and ePortfolios afford opportunities to make learning more visible, and allow learners to collect evidence of their learning in network, which can be seen as learning nodes. These nodes can be acknowledged as evidence of ongoing professional learning and credentialed as such. Linking learning nodes within and across related networks enables mapping and integrating learning that is both personalised and social, informal and formal, as well as open and accredited. This short paper outlines a new professional learning initiative being introduced in New Zealand that is designed around networking and 'node-working'. The initiative is for Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCo), teachers who provide learning support to include all students in school. The professional network for SENCos consists of four learning hubs. *Hub one* is an open network where SENCos connect and collaborate with each other, face-to-face and online, regionally and nationally. In *Hub two* SENCos can subscribe to a professional network and join journal clubs, collaborative research projects, webinars, and share evidence-based practice. *Hub three* uses digital badging to recognise the personalised and collaborative learning that occurs in *Hubs one* and *two*, thus creating learning nodes as markers for credentialing learning across the network. *Hub four* allows for these learning nodes to be mapped within a professional e-portfolio, as part of a formal qualification. The research behind this initiative investigates the effectiveness of networked nodes of learning and the potential it offers to revision professional learning and identity development.

Keywords

Networked learning, professional learning, communities of practice, digital badging, ePortfolios

Shifts in Professional Learning

Conceptions of learning, and Professional Learning and Development (PLD), have shifted over time. Early behaviourist and cognitivist approaches conceptualise learning as the transmission of information to learners. Constructivist and social constructivist approaches view knowledge as residing within an individual, acquired and constructed in individual and social contexts. More recent connectivist and connective knowledge approaches see knowledge as complex, and learning as co-creating meaning through interaction with each other in ever-changing networks and communities (Downes, 2007; Siemens, 2004; Wenmoth, 2006). These shifts show a movement in teaching and learning away from homogeneity to more open, diverse, authentic, life-long and life-wide experiences (Goodyear, 2014; Jones, 2015; Hodgson, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2012). For Wenger (1998) the link between learning and practice is critical and best occurs in situated and authentic communities and networks. This aligns with Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson & McConnell's (2004) early definition of networked learning which includes the role that technology (ICT) plays in promoting connections "between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources" (p. 9).

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These contemporary notions of knowledge and learning as being connected, situated, technology-mediated and networked have much to offer Professional Learning and Development (PLD) initiatives wanting to shift from traditional approaches that for many are 'not working', to more contemporary approaches that aim to integrate professional learning more with professional practice.

Background Context

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has recently changed their funding and support structure for on-going Professional Learning and Development (PLD) for teachers. As part of this change, they undertook a needs analysis on how to best support and strengthen existing PLD structures. They identified that for PLD to be successful, it needs to be: for teachers, by teachers; agile, responsive and timely; provide relevant and current resources and examples of best practice; be needs-driven; include a blended approach and not just online portals; and must support in particular single-teacher subjects (Childs, Dryden, & Jeffries, 2017). The Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCo) constitute a 'single-teacher' group in terms of being the teacher in each school responsible for coordinating inclusive practice and ensuring that all students in the school are able to access the curriculum and have their learning needs met.

Further research into the work of the SENCo in New Zealand (Kearney & Mentis, 2017) identified some unique aspects of their role that invited a more innovative and contemporary approach to on-going professional learning. Unlike other countries who have formalised the SENCo role, in New Zealand there is no legal obligation on schools to appoint SENCos, there is no formal recognition of the role from the Ministry of Education, no additional pay or status and no official training or qualification for the role. A recent study (Kearney & Mentis, 2017) of 65 SENCo across New Zealand found that despite (or as a result of) these factors SENCos report high levels of motivation, job-satisfaction, confidence, and a strong belief in the importance of their role in making a positive difference for marginalised students. SENCos have relative freedom in defining how they will support teachers and students to ensure that all students have equitable experiences in school, and some have changed their title to better suit their role (e.g. Inclusive Education Coordinator, Learning Support Leader). It could be argued that the autonomy and independence that SENCo have in relation to their role and their sense of agency in crafting their own job description that is relevant to their particular context, contributes to their job satisfaction. SENCos also reported that despite (or because of) being time-poor, under-resourced, and isolated in their individual schools, they actively connect with each other, and seek out professional development opportunities to support their work. Investigating whether this optimistic orientation was 'because of' or 'in spite of' the unique role of SENCos in New Zealand, led to the design of a *Learning Support Network* for SENCos. It was hypothesised that a more networked approach to PLD would better suite the unique needs of SENCOs. The *Learning Support Network* thus aims to facilitate and enhance aspects in SENCos on-going professional learning and practice that seem to 'work' well.

Professional Learning Network

A *Learning Support Network* (LSN) was designed which appreciates that SENCo job satisfaction is related to their autonomy, flexibility and diversity of their role, and recognises their need to network and connect with others, gain further recognition of their role, and increase their skills and knowledge. SENCos are often the agents of change in schools as New Zealand moves towards fully including previously marginalised and excluded learners in the mainstream school setting. This is a challenging role, particularly when isolated in separate schools. The LSN seeks to overcome this isolation and facilitate personalised and differentiated learning with, and by, others through integrating informal and formal learning via the design of four networked hubs.

The Four Hubs – node-working in learning networks

Hub one takes cognisance of SENCos need to overcome the isolation of practicing individually in separate schools and allows for connection and collaboration across schools regionally and nationally. This hub enables SENCos to learn with, from, and about each other through online and face-to-face networks, and provides opportunities to communicate, debate, share and curate resources, in order to co-construct meaning and knowledge around their authentic practice. This hub is free and open for all SENCos expressing interest, and links and builds on their existing and naturally occurring networks. This hub provides an online space (through a learning management system) with forums for synchronous and asynchronous discussions as well as databases and glossaries for resource sharing. The functionality of the site enables a repository of resources that SENCos can curate and rate as well as debate the value and application of the items for their practice. Face-to-face get-

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togethers, meetings, seminars and events will complement the online networking. SENCos can start to map their learning with and from each other in this hub, by identifying their learning nodes or artefacts that evidence their learning.

Hub two develops this open and non-formal learning further through subscribed membership to a professional network of SENCo practice. This professional membership hub enables SENCos to collectively strengthen their status and reputation in the wider educational field (as opposed to legislation of the role) and ensures their connectedness without compromising their autonomy. Paid subscription to this hub includes access to a wider online site with more activities and resources available in the learning management system and other networks. SENCos will have the option to engage in a range of diverse activities and events such as: facilitated journal clubs; collaborative and supported research projects and inquiries; webinars with international guests; and spotlights on evidence-based practice. Activities will be facilitated online as well as face-to-face in regions and nationally, thus maximising the affordances of a blended approach to professional learning. It is anticipated that SENCos expertise and collaboration will naturally emerge within the networks, and their contribution and role will be recognised and acknowledged by other SENCos. This evidencing of their reputation in the sector also constitutes a leaning node and can be mapped by SENCos along with their other curated artefacts of learning.

Hub three focuses on the SENCos need for further recognition of ongoing learning that is relevant, authentic, self-paced, and personalised. In this hub, the learning nodes identified in the previous two hubs can be combined with more formal learning nodes such as completion of traditional PLD courses and bespoke short-course modules. The short-course modules will consist of needs-driven, anytime, online, self-paced courses designed by, and for, SENCos with support from university academics. These learning nodes can then be 'micro-credentialed' using digital badging as a more formal recognition of learning. Digital badging is becoming more prominent in education settings and consists of a visual representation (image) of learning with metadata behind the badge image that identifies and specifies the learning (Gibson, Ostashewski, Flintoff, Grant, & Knight, 2015). These can be shared on professional and social media sites as well as within professional online portfolios and websites. Within this LSN network, these badges will act as evidence and acknowledgement of learning nodes that align with the competencies of effective SENCo practice. Digital badging offers potential to recognise experience and acknowledge acquisition of skills and knowledge across different contexts in more authentic and flexible ways than traditional certification. In addition, they contribute to a more playful approach to learning, drawing on the gamification aspects of collating artefacts that evidence learning.

Hub four builds on the previous hubs by cross-crediting the digitally badged learning nodes into a formal university qualification. The digital badges, along with the curated artefacts of evidence and reflections on practice will be collated into a professional online portfolio. The portfolio will be designed to showcase the evidence of meeting the SENCo competencies required for a postgraduate level qualification. Discussion is currently underway to enable a partnership between the university and the LSN network to cross-credit the digitally badged learning nodes in a curated professional portfolio, into a postgraduate Learning Support qualification. Portfolios are a valuable tool for enabling professionals to capture authentic learning through curating, and reflecting on, artefacts of their collaborative practice and hence developing professional philosophies and identity. As Wenger (1998) posits, professional identity is more than just skills and knowledge – it involves a process of becoming a particular kind of person, through joining and belonging to a professional community. Professional ePortfolios will enable SENCos to evidence their journey of 'becoming' and 'belonging'.

Overall, it is hypothesised that the four hubs of the *Learning Support Network* will meet the SENCo need for: collaboration; ongoing learning; recognition of their role; increased reputation; and mapping of expertise in the network. The aim is to achieve this while still retaining the autonomy and flexibility of the individual SENCo role, providing for differentiated learning pathways and opportunities to learn through projects and case-work as well as relevant social media. Through the collectively designed and evolving network, the goal is to enable SENCos to engage in life-long, life-wide and life-deep professional learning that integrates the informal and formal yet remains non-regulated. If successful, this design could offer potential for other professional groups who seek to create learning networks that are more collective, sustaining and authentic, and for whom traditional learning and development courses are increasingly not work.

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Do networking nodes work?

This paper presents and discusses a design for PLD that moves away from traditional courses to a more networked learning approach. The value of designing for ongoing professional learning as a network of four interrelated learning hubs is highlighted. In particular, the challenges and benefits of using digital badging and ePortolios to showcase nodes of learning within networked hubs will be explored. The authors' intent is to unpack the extent to which networked nodes of learning can constitute evidence of professional competence and become recognised as a formal qualification. The LSN aims to integrate and actualise the best of both social and personalised learning as well as informal and formal learning simultaneously. This model presents a fresh approach to conceptualising and designing professional learning that moves away from traditional, didactic methods that are increasingly 'not working' to a more innovative approach of 'node working' within networks.

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