Studying Informal Technology-Mediated Learning Networks: A Case Study on eTwinning Analytics

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Abstract

Methods, tools and approaches to study large-scale informal professional development networks have evolved thanks to the abundance of online and social networking platforms, capacities to capture and process large data-sets, and better understanding of underlying assumptions of professional development needs and their requirements. The *Teachers' Lifelong Learning Network* project (www.tellnet.eun.org) addresses these issues using eTwinning as a case study.

eTwinning platform is currently used by more than 155.000 teachers in Europe. The underlying assumption is that teachers' informal networks can help participants upskill in competence building, such as key competences for 21st century, and in personal and professional development. According to OECD's TALIS report from 2009, teachers' co-operation can create opportunities for social and emotional support, exchange of ideas and practical advice that can thus enhance professionalism, feelings of self-efficacy and prevent stress and "burnout". Moreover, another important aspect is that there is a strong belief that teachers' activities in collaboration networks can have a relation with their teaching and instructional practices in the classroom.

This keynote address first outlines the methods chosen for the *Tellnet*-project to study professional development networks (e.g. social network analysis, information visualisation, future forecasting), and then gives a short introduction to eTwinning, which is used as a case study. This technology-mediated platform offers teachers with three main streams of activities: teachers can find partners to run cross-border school collaboration projects using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). On the other hand, various formal and informal professional development (PD) activities are offered (e.g. distance courses for teachers and more informal PD activities such as *online groups* on topics of interest). Additionally, the participants have a set of social networking tools available, these include a profile page with personal and professional information, possibility to display connections to friends (i.e. contacts), to post on personal journal (e.g. status updates) and to comment on others journals.

Finally, the keynote address introduces the framework of eTwinning Analytics which builds upon the TALIS definition of *teachers' cooperation* separating *coordination and collaboration activities* from *professional collaboration*. Whereas Tellnet focuses on studying social networks among eTwinners, eTwinning Analytics add value to understanding how users interact with various tools and interfaces. Using authentic empirical data extracted from the eTwinning platform, a proof of concept is demonstrated illustrating how differentiating activities on the platform according to above-mentioned categories can bring more insights into understanding the value of activities and interactions within professional networks.

Keywords

Teachers' collaboration networks, learning networks, analytics, teachers' co-operation, collaboration, continuous professional development, Tellnet-project.