

Crossing the Divide: Connecting Social Scholarship and Professional Learning Networks

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Abstract: We propose the argument that the practices of social scholarship and those that take place in professional learning networks (PLN)s are the same activities taken up by two different groups of people: those in K-12 and those in academia. Within the paper we describe both phenomena, define their characteristics, and identify their primary user-groups. We then draw parallels between the two and offer examples of practices that occur both in social scholarship and PLNs, supporting our claim that they are the same type of practice. We include proposed methodology for future research that uses Tweet data from two user groups to examine the nature of social media practices in K-12 and higher education.

Introduction

Traditional professional development has long been a part of K-12 and higher education. Forms vary widely, for instance workshops, lectures, courses or meetings, on select days to learn something new (Buysse, Winton, & Rouse, 2009). Tobin (1998) argues that, “learning doesn't take place just in training programs, but should be part of every employee's everyday activities” (para. 1). Social media has created opportunities for learning to occur (e.g., Greenhow & Askari, 2017; Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014). Both *social scholarship* and *professional learning networks* (PLN) have appeared where information is reciprocally submitted and distributed in a two-way or multi-way directionality (Greenhow, 2009; Trust, 2012).

In this paper, we argue that *social scholarship* and *PLNs* share a similar purpose and structure yet, have evolved independently--one with Academics and one with practicing K-12 educators. We propose a framework for examining both areas of practice as professional activities. By identifying the commonalities between social scholarship and PLNs, we may find ways to better connect research and practice.

The Two Concepts

Social scholarship seeks to leverage social media affordances and potential values of openness to accomplish scholarly expectations (e.g. teaching and publishing). For example, through social media connections scholars can share and review research-in-progress providing informal peer-review. Through such collaborative efforts knowledge becomes increasingly accessible and decentralized. Furthermore, specific to this study, when Academics participate in social scholarship it is more likely K-12 educators participating in PLN's will be exposed to research-in-progress.

Social Scholarship

The changing nature of technologically mediated scholarly practices in collaboration and dissemination of research are well established (e.g., Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Meyer & McNeal, 2011; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013). For example, Networked Participatory Scholarship (NPS) (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012) has been identified as a

means to share, review, critique, and strengthen one's scholarship using the affordances of social media. Furthermore, Greenhow & Gleason (2014) proposed a revised model for scholarship which builds on Ernest Boyer's (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered* and on open and digital scholarship models that seek to re-envision the nature of scholarship in light of technological and social media advancements. Their model includes the four main areas that Boyer (1990) defined: Discovery, Integration, Teaching, and Application (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014). However, their view broadens the definition and focuses on the uses of social media to engage in those four areas. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on social scholarship as defined by Greenhow and Gleason (2014).

Characteristics/Uses

The four areas of social scholarship are defined in the literature (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014) and explained further here. Social Scholarship of Discovery (SOD) includes sharing original research that expands or challenges current knowledge in a discipline and blended publication processes. For example, a peer review process in a journal submission requires the discovery of new ideas as does informal, and social review processes where authors engage a wider, non-specialist audience. Open access sharing of publications via social media when authors specifically seek scrutiny and implicit review that occurs through metadata (e.g. tagging, bookmarking, favoriting, retweeting, pageviews, download numbers) both demonstrate SOD.

Social Scholarship of Integration (SOI) occurs at the boundaries between disciplines, making connections between fields. Large data sets can be mined in collaborative, interdisciplinary teams to illuminate complex issues in a way that was previously not possible when findings were posted almost exclusively in field-specific journals.

Social Scholarship of Teaching (SOTL) encourages students to be critical, creative thinkers while stimulating active learning. Scholars still expected to transform and extend knowledge in ways that push all learners in new directions. Social SOTL suggests both amplification and disruption of existing practices - increased engagement in course material, increased student-instructor interactions.

Social Scholarship of Application (SOA) serves interests of the larger community by facilitating dynamic interaction between theory and practice. Social SOA means expanded sites and methods for application scholarship that address community challenges - scholarship becomes a joint venture that breaks down traditional binaries like research/practice, scholar/participant, inside/outside, and contributor/user.

Audiences

As defined, social scholarship is practiced by those in academia. Researchers, professors, and graduate students who are engaging in active discovery, integration, teaching, and application are primarily the audiences referenced in social scholarship literature. Many disciplines are debating the practice of social scholarship and engaging in the practices associated with it (Taraborelli, 2008; Greenhow, 2009).

Professional Learning Networks

An extensive body of literature exists around professional learning networks (PLN). The term originated from Tobin (1998) who coined personal learning network as "a group of people who can guide your learning, point you to learning opportunities, answer your questions, and give you the benefit of their own knowledge and experience" (para. 1). Today the terminology PLN is used for professional or personal learning network, and these are used interchangeably. An early formal definition included key components of collaboration, dissemination, reflection, and self-selection within, "a system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning" (Trust, 2012, p. 133). Today that definition has been revised: "PLNs are uniquely personalized, complex systems of interactions consisting of people, resources, and digital tools that support ongoing learning and professional growth" (Krutka, Carpenter, & Trust, 2016, p. 28).

Characteristics/Uses

Teachers conceptualize their PLNs in a variety of ways, including people, technologies, and resources (Trust, et al., 2016). Resource sharing can occur through many channels. RSS feeds allow users to select certain authors whom they want to follow and receive that personalized information. Users also have the option to subscribe to post updates via email. Both of these allow users to discover new information and to expand their own knowledge (Trust, 2012). Face-to-face networks are also part of PLNs that allow individuals to communicate and share locally.

Social media connections can be harnessed in a number of ways for users to continue discovery practices; however, the platforms also facilitate interactions and feedback between a user and a peer, the community, and/or students (Trust, 2012). This also allows support from a large group of peers, which brings with it the broad perspectives of diverse populations. For example, teachers can pose questions using FlipGrid and engage with followers to get answers or use hashtags (e.g. #edtech, #engchat) to ask questions, share resources, participate in synchronous and asynchronous discussion, and reflect on practice in groups. The nature of social media allows it to function in a variety of ways, allowing users to engage in many aspects of PLNs through one platform; however, it is important to emphasize that online communities, social media sites, and networks of practice are distinct from PLNs, which are “broader, multifaceted systems” that incorporate one or more of those community formats for online and face-to-face learning (Trust, et al., 2016, p. 17).

Audiences

Classroom teachers as well as building administrators are active in Professional Learning Networks (Rudolph, 2016). They use various types of social media, online communities, and face-to-face resources to seek out support and resources for their teaching as well as to engage in sharing of their work, continuing of their learning, and partnering with others.

Methods

To analyze the characteristics of social scholarship and professional learning networks we first explored the literature surrounding them, including the definitions of each practice, the characteristics and uses of each practice, and the audiences/users of each practice. To further examine the topic, we collected Twitter data for representative populations--K-12 teachers from a western rural community, and Ph.D. students at a large midwestern university. In future analysis, we will code tweets by both populations using the revised framework to determine if there is a difference in what both target populations are doing with social media practices and why those differences did or did not occur.

Discussion

Social scholarship and PLNs share similar practices. Figure 1 below illustrates some of the overlaps.

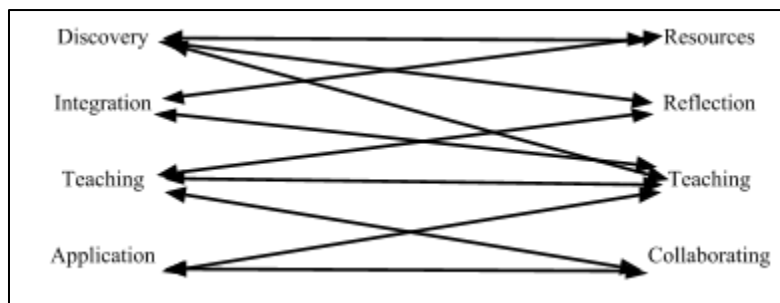


Figure 1: Relationships between Social Scholarship and Professional Learning Networks

As illustrated in the figure, the presence of social media has allowed for social scholarship and PLNs to absorb many of the same functions but still be considered by two different groups. There is overlap between the practices that occur from both social scholarship and PLN perspectives. For example, both groups read new information from others as a way to continue their learning. This could be considered Discovery or Resource Gathering. Sharing information with students is a component of both practices as both parties include teaching as a part of their job. The advent of social media has also allowed for facilitation of partnerships for projects, crossing curricular divisions, and engaging with the community outside of the school/institution. This is application as well as collaboration.

Implications/Conclusions

The isolation of social scholarship and professional learning networks is representative of a larger divide between K-12 educators and academia. While both higher education and K-12 educators take part in similar forms of professional learning, there are several clear divisions between K-12 teaching and academia, often characterized by the disconnect between research and practice (Smith, Kindall, Carter, & Beachner, 2016). For example, research suggests that interdisciplinary instruction supports student achievement (Han, Capraro, & Capraro, 2015). Testing and most teaching in K-12 environments, however, is subject-area specific and isolated (Al Salami, Makela, & de Miranda, 2017). In this case, research best-practices do not match today's typical classroom environment. This is exacerbated in the United States where, federal funding is tied specifically to quantitative, research-based practices (see guidelines for funding in the Every Student Succeeds Act, 2016). However, there are rigorous standards that result in high-quality qualitative research as well (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002).

This disconnect is even more pronounced in quantitative research where methodology standards require the isolation of variables. This is the exact opposite of what teachers must do in classrooms: they differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of all students, attempting to account for a large number of variables (e.g. prior knowledge, academic interests, socioeconomic status, behavior disorders) for student success (NCATE, 2008). This further divides research and practice.

Social scholarship and PLNs originated in different areas but now exist to serve similar purposes: resource dissemination, reflection, evaluation, and networking. While the types of resources sought by user groups varies significantly depending on the user's primary goal, the motivations and behaviors are the same. Both practices are employed by users to find resources, collaborate with peers, reflect on practices, and engage with new partners. Future data from collected Tweets will contribute to the understanding of the relationship that both groups (academia and K-12) have with social scholarship and professional learning networks.

Connections between those in K-12 and academic settings have the potential to bridge the divide between these two groups who should be working together to improve student learning. Uniting social scholarship and PLNs as *social learning networks* where professional development occurs through a variety of channels may allow for the improvement of both teaching and research in education. We encourage further study to explore this potential

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