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Pathways to Participation for Preservice Teachers

Using Online Networks to Connect
to Real-World Practice and Experience

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edWeb.net began helping educators connect and collaborate in 2008. We now connect with hundreds of educators every day, at all levels of education. We see how motivating and energizing it is for educators to use online networks to connect with each other across all boundaries.

Educators are using online networks to find new ideas and resources, learn from experts and peers, and get support to try new approaches and technology. Online networks are a great way for educators to meet new colleagues and friends, and to deepen relationships that often lead to or extend a face-to-face meeting at a conference.

We'd like to share what we've learned to help educators move forward faster with connected teaching and learning. We hope that our experience and insights can help contribute to understanding what works.

Pathways to Participation starts at the beginning of a teacher's professional life. Online networks can introduce preservice teachers to the real world of teaching before they enter the classroom, providing experts, resources, mentorship, and support as they begin their careers. Please reach out to us with your feedback and experience on this subject.

Lisa

Lisa Schmucki
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edWeb.net is a free professional learning and social network that makes it easy for educators to connect and collaborate, share information and best practices, and create professional learning communities. edWeb hosts online professional learning communities for educators to connect with peers and experts all around the country and the world on the most innovative and progressive areas in education such as game-based learning, mobile learning, tech tools for the classroom, digital citizenship, Common Core Standards, and much more. edWeb programs get high praise and participation by offering free webinars, online chats and discussions, archived re-sources, and certificates of completion. Schools and districts lack the time, expertise, and funding to provide the professional development educators need — edWeb fills that gap.

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PRESERVICE TEACHERS
Pathway to Participation

Contents

About the author: Dr. Karen Collias is an educational advisor and researcher with more than 25 years of experience in the United States and abroad. She has worked as an analyst, evaluator and director in national educational reform programs focusing on teacher preparation and science education and recently completed an evaluation of STEM education for the State of Delaware. Karen is the founder of Knowledge Without Borders™, a website dedicated to discovering creative and innovative solutions in education, philanthropy and entrepreneurship. Contact Karen at karen@knowwithoutborders.org or @KarenCollias

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Key Insights

Online communities enrich preservice teacher education and provide an immediate connection with real-world teaching practices and experiences.

✦ Researchers have identified major benefits of teacher online connectivity to fill the gap between what preservice teachers experience in the university and what they will find in schools.

✦ Despite research-based benefits, preservice teachers have little motivation for university-based online community involvement, but "strong intent" to participate in online communities once they graduate.

✦ Teacher educators add value to teacher preparation by exposing students to real-world teaching practices through extra-university online communities that address individual interests and affinities.

✦ Preservice, in-service teachers and teacher educators participate in online communities based on interests but also in those perceived as easy to use and trustworthy with opportunities for social learning.

✦ Independent online communities can connect preservice teachers to educators who share their interests, and provide access to resources and exposure to the real world of teaching.

✦ Established connectivity through online communities reduces isolation among new teachers and delivers expertise, mentoring, and opportunities to establish and expand professional networks.

✦ Online platforms outside the university support teacher education reform efforts through scalable, accessible and cost-effective options to introduce and inculcate educator connectivity as a lifelong habit and component of successful teaching and learning.

The Importance of Connecting Educators

In 2013, approximately 200,000 teacher candidates graduated from 1,200 college or university-based teacher education programs throughout the United States. Among those who actually enter the classroom, 40-50 percent will leave the profession within five years, primarily due to a lack of supportive communication and isolation. "Newly minted teachers … sink or swim," observed Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Preservice preparation programs rarely connect students to practicing teachers who can provide them with the knowledge, resources, mentoring and general support they will need to be successful in the classroom.

For more than a decade, teacher educators have tried to address this issue by connecting preservice and practicing teachers using Internet technology. Connectivity enriches preservice education, exposing future teachers to real-world instructional practices and experiences, and is a crucial component in reforming teacher education. Participation in web-based online communities delivers research-based benefits, including customized individual learning, ongoing communication and collaboration with peers, and access to resources. Educators who become acquainted with and engage in online learning communities as preservice students may avert the isolation and associated frustrations often experienced by new teachers.

Colleges of education, however, have had limited success in establishing and sustaining online communities for several reasons. Both professors and students often perceive online participation as a discrete course requirement instead of a lifelong habit. Once the semester is finished, they usually see little need to maintain connections. In fact, most students no longer contribute to university-sponsored online communities by the time they graduate. Moreover, these online communities, which are small and private, often sputter and stall because they are underfunded and do not have consistent university-affiliated moderators to facilitate learning.

But continuous online connectivity is too important to be neglected in the education of future teachers. Instead of introducing individual short-lived college communities, teacher educators can expose their students to independent online communities that encourage ongoing participation after graduation. Independent online communities can be a valuable educational resource, constituting scalable, accessible and cost-effective professional development opportunities that afford preservice teachers a window into the real world of teacher practice.

Early adoption of independent online communities by preservice teachers has the potential to inculcate habits of lifelong learning, communication and collaboration with colleagues, and access to content and pedagogical resources before they enter the classroom as newly minted teachers.

Past Research and Experience

The idea of connecting preservice and in-service teachers through Internet technology goes back more than 20 years. One of the earliest efforts was LabNet, a National Science Foundation (NSF) funded preservice learning project at Tufts University, initiated in 1993. The goal of LabNet was to develop a community of preservice and in-service science and math teachers who wanted to share interests in "project-enhanced" learning through electronic communication consisting of "electronic chats" and "electronic mail."

An analysis of data submitted to NSF in a first year report outlined affective benefits of the project. Preservice teachers reported they could discuss their individual "ideas and experiences" with practicing teachers and receive "specific, practical ideas and advice" in a forum that allowed for experimentation and innovation. In-service teachers described "stimulating topics of conversation" on up-to-date science and math methodologies and theoretical innovations, creating access to new ideas they might not otherwise know about. Both groups concurred that their conversations helped fill the "gap between what novice teachers experience in university teacher education and what they will find in schools." Teacher educators characterized the ability to connect with real teachers in real schools, reducing the "isolation of the university professor," as the major benefits they received through participation in the project (Hammer and DiMauro, 1996).

Despite documented evidence of benefits derived from electronic connectivity, data indicated that participating preservice teachers were no longer involved after graduation. The students perceived their memberships in the community as a course requirement, an interesting seminar activity, or a discrete experience during their undergraduate teacher training. Researchers, however, gained a major insight through their study of LabNet: teacher educators, preservice and in-service teachers all observed benefits in collaborative communities, but had little motivation to incorporate "electronic communication" as an integral part of teacher preparation.

More than a decade later, researchers explored preservice and in-service "electronic communication" by studying online communities of practice (Reich, Levinson and Johnston, 2011). In particular, they wanted to understand why it was so difficult to create and sustain online communities in which both preservice and in-service teachers participated. They found that preservice students "expressed strong intent" to become involved in professional learning networks as future teachers. As students, however, their involvement revolved around course requirements. Researchers also discovered that closed university-sponsored online communities were less attractive than open, public networks, which enabled participants to interact with a "broader array of engaged and thoughtful professionals" than possible within a university community.

An analysis of preservice and in-service teachers' participation in the massive online Ning network for social studies revealed they enjoyed opportunities to connect with

There is a gap between what novice teachers experience in university teacher education and what they will find in schools.

— David Hammer and Vanessa DiMauro

peers both in the United States and throughout the world. With only 4-10 percent of online community participants contributing 50-80 percent of online conversations and resources, large communities offered variety that small, closed communities could not. However, informants reported that it often took an excessive amount of time to communicate effectively with diverse colleagues who had no context in which to place a real-time practical problem or theoretical issue. Preservice student data showed a preference for face-to-face conversations with professors or classmates "who knew them well" rather than interactions "with distant strangers" (Reich, Levinson and Johnston, 2011). That insight is repeated in a 2013 survey, which reports that "In spite of their comfort with using technology tools, the aspiring teachers say that their field experiences as student teachers and observing their professors are the best way for them to learn about how to integrate technology within instruction" (Project Tomorrow, 2013). The transition from course dependent communication to a new routine of regular interaction in an online forum can be difficult for both preservice students and their professors. Researchers conclude that "exposure" to online communities as students might provide a preservice pathway to participation in online communities as new teachers (Reich, Levinson and Johnston, 2011).

Current Practices

Today new teachers and their veteran peers are actively encouraged by the National Education Technology Plan to make use of the opportunities afforded by online communities and social networks. Connectivity offers countless links "to content, expertise and activities through online communities" (Office of Educational Technology, U.S. Department of Education, 2010). A teacher survey listed five major reasons for participation in online communities: 1) to share emotional aspects of teaching; 2) to communicate about awkward situations difficult to discuss in local settings; 3) to combat isolation; 4) to explore new ideas about resources and teaching strategies; and, 5) to experience camaraderie (Hur and Brush, 2009).

Recognizing the significance of support offered by online communities, researchers discovered possible factors that might predict participation among preservice students as new teachers. A mixed method research design survey of 286 preservice students in 2011 suggested that "positive attitudes and perceptions of perceived usefulness" toward online communities are "significant predictors of intentions" to use Web 2.0 technologies in the future (Sadaf, Newby and Ertmer, 2012). Focusing on intentions, researchers recommended that teacher educators "support the progression between preservice teachers' intentions to actual actions by providing opportunities" to become acquainted with extra-university online communities as students. The most significant factors correlated to future use were "perceived usefulness, ease of use and perceived compatibility" (Sadaf, Newby and Ertmer, 2012). Certainly, independent online platforms offered the scale, usability and flexibility that have been difficult to achieve in small, private university-sponsored communities.
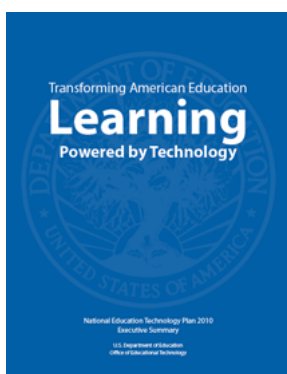
Download the report at
www.ed.gov/technology/netp-2010

In addition to perceptions of usefulness, compatibility and ease of use, preservice teachers, like their in-service peers, must feel a sense of trust and confidence in the independent online community. Researchers found variables contributing to trustworthiness in online communities included "clear purpose, common identity, multiple options and opportunities for social learning." They also underlined the importance of a consistent and credible moderator to build trust among educators using online communities (Booth, 2012).

Preconceived notions held by educators of independent commercial online learning communities often made it difficult to establish confidence in the quality of their knowledge and pedagogical offerings, resources and services. Faculty members at colleges of education are generally suspicious of technology and often view technological tools as a way to enhance didactic courses. Analysts attribute such attitudes to the "nascent phase of educational technology" represented by independent online communities. They cite longstanding confidence among educators in the "Scholastic Book Club" or "TIME for Kids" as examples of ultimate acceptance of quality in established commercial products. Because they are relatively new vehicles of professional development, commercial online communities are still looked upon with uncertainty. And technological innovations can be disruptive at first, but ultimately prove their indispensability. Commercial online learning communities will have the impact on the delivery of professional development services "the same way Craigslist has impacted newspapers, Netflix has impacted Blockbuster, and Apple has impacted mobile communications" (Hernandez, 2012).

Such preconceived notions among educators are compounded by disparities in the customary cultures of colleges of education and K-12 school districts. Tenure demands at universities and leadership turnover in school districts make it difficult to find committed moderators for online communities. Furthermore, teacher educators and their preservice students often hesitate to commit to ongoing participation because they do not understand the value of online communities — even though 20 years of research have validated the benefits. According to University of Memphis professor Trey Martindale, programs designed to connect preservice and K-12 educators are difficult to sustain because their goals are "not embedded enough in what colleges of education do," precisely traditional course delivery with discrete clinical experiences.

The extra-institutional connections and communications inherent in online communities have not yet been integrated into teacher preparation programs at the university, observed Martindale. Participation in a prescribed online community is perceived as an "add-on" or "just another thing" by both professors and students. There is "little understanding of the rationale" for online networks among teacher candidates. Professor Martindale's colleague, Dr. Carmen Weaver, adds, "Student teachers no longer participate in a university online community" once a grant ends because "there is no one to facilitate."

Some teacher preparation institutions actively pursue online community participation through partnerships with surrounding school districts, usually with little success. Christina O'Connor, director of Project ENRICH at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) noted that introducing the use of online communities "in the context of a class requirement was not authentic." Students did comply with assignments requiring participation, but "it was difficult to encourage participation without a carrot or a stick." While there was evidence that preservice teachers did indeed use social media platforms such as Facebook to keep in touch with their friends, continued O'Connor, they did not use the university online community once they graduated and began their careers as teachers. "Teachers are busy people with competing priorities and not a lot of time left for enrichment. Without specific needs, they will not go online."

Georgia State University's Dashaunda Patterson echoed O'Connor's observations. In her capacity as project director of NET-Q (Network for Enhancing Teacher Quality), she requires her preservice students to participate in an online community "to get an idea of life at a school." The university-based community is "very active" during the fall semester and tapers off in the spring. Patterson encourages her students to make use of the online community once they get their student teaching placements so they can understand that they "are not the only ones with challenges."

There is "no incentive structure" built into university-based online communities, she continued. University professors or staff members volunteer to facilitate, receiving occasional assistance from teacher-friends in surrounding school districts. Due to the voluntary nature of the role of moderator, it is difficult to maintain consistency and continuity. Preservice teachers also do not participate regularly once they have completed their course requirements. They have "no time" and do not like the university practice of prescribing community discussion topics in which they may not be interested. Patterson says that though current student participation is based on compliance rather than interest, she hopes university course requirements will provide exposure to online communities and serve as a "gateway to participation" after graduation.

Research has shown strong "intent" among preservice students to connect with other teachers who share their ongoing interests through participation in online communities when they become practicing teachers. Educational technology consultant Kathleen Fulton believes preservice teachers and their in-service peers are most likely to participate in online networks based on "affinity groups." She suggests that individual interests and self-awareness of professional content and pedagogical needs among educators will most always trump established institution-based affiliated groups. Once they are aware of what online communities offer, preservice and in-service teachers can find what they need through what Fulton originally labeled a "common marketplace for formal and informal collegial interactions" (Fulton, Burns and Goldenburg, 2005).

Since "teachers themselves will be the drivers of what groups are most important to them," explains Fulton, educators will participate in online networks only if "they have

a reason." Therefore, colleges of education can much better serve their students by exposing them to existing online communities and "creating an expectation of connection" as new teachers and throughout their careers. Online communities afford all educators the opportunity to learn from each other based on their own interests. And, learning from others based on individual interests, not those dictated by a university, district or state, is "the most powerful," says Fulton. She envisions teachers of the future as "independent agents," taking advantage of online communities that "cross barriers of time and space" in search of best practices.

Teacher preparation institutions can create conditions to encourage continuing participation in online learning communities after graduation — "creating an expectation of online participation" in the words of Kathleen Fulton — by exposing their students to independent online platforms as part of the teacher preparation process.
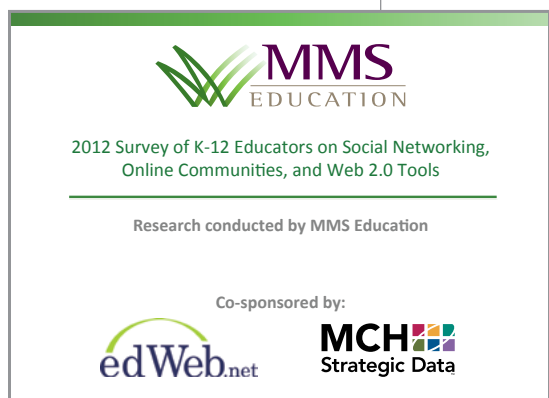
Independent Online Communities

Independent online platforms for collaboration in education, including edWeb.net, Classroom 2.0, ACSD Edge, and NSTA, among others, are examples of networks that provide affinity groups where educators can connect with peers and experts to find resources, ideas, and support.

Educators are also using general platforms including Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Facebook, and Pinterest to network, share ideas, and find support. Many "connected" educators use Twitter hashtags such as #edchat (for all educators) #edtechchat (for edtech info) #tlchat (for teacher/librarians) #cpchat (for connected principals) to connect with peers.

A key advantage of using independent social media platforms is that many of them are free, reducing the cost barrier at a time when funds are limited. edWeb.net co-sponsored a *Survey on K-12 Educators on Social Networking, Online Communities, and Web 2.0 Tools*. This report is a good source of information on this topic.

Independent online communities do not provide formal accreditation but some provide "digital badges" and edWeb.net provides a Certificate of Completion to educators who view a webinar. An increasing number of schools, districts, and states accept edWeb's certificates as credit for professional development.

MMS EDUCATION

2012 Survey of K-12 Educators on Social Networking, Online Communities, and Web 2.0 Tools

Research conducted by MMS Education

Co-sponsored by:

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Download the report at http://bit.ly/1mZA7xj

edWeb.net Insights

edWeb.net provides an example of how an independent online network can be used to support teacher educators, preservice teachers, and practicing teachers in cooperative districts. Introduced to several colleges of education as a collaboration network by the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (NCTAF)-sponsored Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (TLINC) project, edWeb.net supports TLINC's goal "to encourage collaboration in teacher preparation by bringing student teachers, mentor teachers and university faculty together in a meaningful way" (nctaf.org/tlinc/).

Interviews with teacher educators at colleges of education acquainted with edWeb.net through TLINC provide examples of how they use the edWeb.net platform, and edWeb's professional "affinity" communities with free webinars, to prepare new teachers. Christina O'Connor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) encourages her preservice students to take advantage of resources and interactions with real world teachers offered by edWeb. UNCG has set up a private online community for preservice students and professors, as well as supervising K-12 teachers, to identify and discuss issues related to real-world practice presented in a chosen edWeb webinar.

O'Connor sees potential in edWeb.net to support preservice and in-service teachers through affinity-based online communities and up-to-date educational resources. "The quality level is excellent," adds O'Connor, "edWeb has developed a good product with lots to offer in quality." The sheer number of edWeb members offers opportunities for learning and collaboration that private, university-based online communities cannot begin to match. UNCG has six small private online communities on edWeb that include Project ENRICH Clinical Supervision, Inductee Cohort, Resident Program, as well as general private communities such as Interns Exploring Mobile Devices and Preservice and Master Teachers (edWeb.net, 2013).

Dashaunda Patterson at Georgia State has found that preservice students lessen participation in private university-based online communities when they have "no input into themes" posted for discussions. She encourages her students to use edWeb as part of their individual coursework and professional development and to share what they learn with their peers. The feedback she has received indicates that students are not using online learning communities as much as they are gravitating toward edWeb webinars. They can select webinars based on their individual interests and access them on their own time. Patterson observed that students continue to use Facebook for personal connectivity and platforms such as edWeb for professional connectivity. Like UNCG, Georgia State also has several private communities for NET-Q coordinators, and teacher residents with few members and little participation.

Another example of colleges of education using edWeb.net comes from the University of New Mexico. Cree Myers, coordinator of academic advisement at UNM's College of Education, successfully uses the edWeb platform to connect with branch campus students who live in rural areas and cannot come to the main campus for advisement.
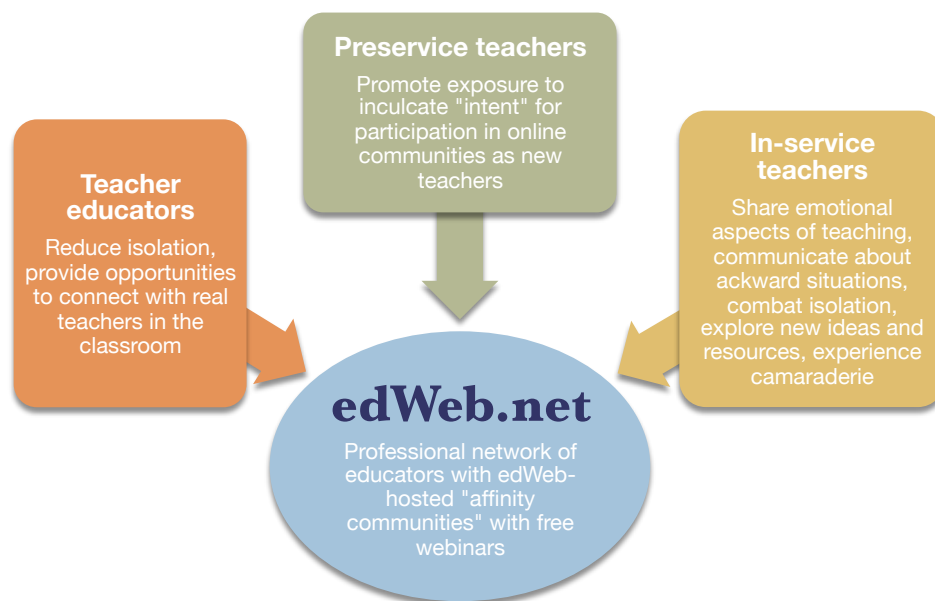
edWeb has developed a good product with lots to offer in quality.

—Christina O'Connor, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

She explains: "The idea is that I'll be available for chat at a designated and advertised time and that students will log on with their questions. We can't advise over the phone because there is no way to validate their identity." Carmen Weaver at the University of Memphis also has made use of the edWeb platform to connect with student teachers with placements in rural areas of Tennessee. She notes that using edWeb to connect with these novices has helped tremendously in "reducing feelings of isolation."

Preservice teachers
Promote exposure to inculcate "intent" for participation in online communities as new teachers

Teacher educators
Reduce isolation, provide opportunities to connect with real teachers in the classroom

In-service teachers
Share emotional aspects of teaching, communicate about ackward situations, combat isolation, explore new ideas and resources, experience camaraderie

edWeb.net
Professional network of educators with edWeb-hosted "affinity communities" with free webinars

To counter feelings of isolation and offer options for individual learning and affinity-based community participation, O'Connor of UNCG has found edWeb's "New Teacher Help" community particularly useful both to UNCG students and practicing teachers in surrounding Guilford and Winston-Salem school districts. edWeb.net created the community in 2011. The community host and moderator is Shannon Holden, an assistant principal and former teacher with 20 years of teaching experience and a passionate belief in the power of connectivity among new and veteran educators. The community, with informal mentorship, was founded as a forum to help new teachers with classroom skills, dealing with parents, job and career issues, and a place to go when they experience difficulties. The community has attracted a mix of new teachers, preservice teachers, veteran teachers, teacher educators, principals, and district administrators. The participation of teacher educators adds value, particularly by providing resource suggestions and links, and also helps those educators understand the challenges new teachers face as they enter the classroom.

After several months of facilitating the "New Teacher Help" community, Holden discovered many new teachers were afraid to participate because they did not want others to know they were struggling and think they were "dumb." He decided to invite people to be his "friend" on edWeb so they could send him questions through private messages. This approach has been very successful. He reports, "I get between 10 and 20 private messages a day (from teachers), many of whom are at the end of

their rope." In 2012, Holden was asked to host another community on edWeb, "Using TechTools in the Classroom." Holden observed that novice and veteran educators were much more willing to interact in this forum because "folks don't mind being seen as 'clueless' in regards to implementing technology in the classroom."

There is great potential for edWeb.net to connect the traditionally disparate cultures of higher education and K-12 school districts. The variety of online communities, webinars and resources address the interest and needs of virtually every educator. With edWeb.net, preservice and in-service teachers, as well as teacher educators, can expand the boundaries of a 21st century vision of professional development customized to meet individual interests and needs as determined by educators themselves.

Opportunities and Challenges on the Road Ahead

Independent online platforms, many of which are free, present new alternatives to traditional preservice learning and in-service professional development. Because these platforms are often global in reach, educators at all levels can now share knowledge and resources, and appreciate professional connectivity, as never before. The interaction offered by online communities enables educators to escape the isolation of the classroom and network on a global scale.

Exposure to independent online communities is especially important for preservice teachers. Research has shown that exposure is a catalyst of intent, which is a significant variable in predicting online participation among new teachers. Participating in, or simply observing, online communities allow preservice teachers the opportunity to see the teaching profession in action. A realistic vision of teaching before entering the classroom may counter the exodus that claims far too many new teachers within the first five years of entry into the profession.

However, there are challenges to overcome for independent online platforms to be commonly used for connectivity among preservice and in-service teachers, and teacher educators. Evaluator Jody Britten of the Metri Group suggests three major challenges: platform fatigue, lack of consistency in moderators, and quality control. An online platform can open the door to a myriad of resources, but the reality is that most teacher educators, pre-service and in-service teachers do not know how to effectively utilize online communities. Most teacher educators think of them in a traditional didactic manner, for example, prescriptive thematic discussions each week, making the online community seem like another class. Preservice students, who are very busy and often overwhelmed, cannot see a rationale for participation in an online community if it is not a course requirement. They continue to categorize certain online

platforms like Blackboard as tools for coursework, and others like Facebook as tools for personal connectivity, often never realizing the potential of other online networks to support their professional networking, development, and career advancement.

In-service teachers are also very busy — they want immediate information to address a need on a particular day and have little time to think strategically when it comes to utilizing the expertise, resources and peer support provided by online communities. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are becoming more and more popular in schools. Linking the isolated, school-based, in-person PLC with resources offered by interconnected, global online communities opens up just-in-time professional learning for 21st century teachers.

Size and participation are important factors in the engagement level of a community. In general, about 10% of community members are active. For university-based communities, which tend to be small, it is difficult to get a core of active participation. Moreover, these communities depend on volunteer professor or graduate student moderators, which present major challenges to sustained activity. Most professors have little incentive to moderate communities given the "publish or perish" mentality of higher education. Independent online communities offer scale not possible in small private university-based online communities. Independent online communities with a larger membership base find it easier to "keep the conversation going" among significant numbers of active participants.

Quality control is another challenge to participation in independent online communities by teacher educators, preservice and in-service teachers. While independent online platforms are increasingly recognized for their resource-rich offerings and their power of connectivity, they are not yet fully accepted as recommended sources for professional development by colleges of education and school districts.

Systems are needed to evaluate and give recognition and credit to preservice and in-service teachers for participation in independent online professional learning communities. Resources such as the federally funded U.S. Department of Education's "Connected Educator Initiative" encourage educators to engage in informal online professional learning. Digital badges are an increasingly popular way to recognize online learning. edWeb.net provides Certificates of Completion to educators who attend a live webinar or view a recording (if they pass a quiz). These types of awards and recognitions are important first steps.

However, there does not yet exist an accepted protocol outlining expectations of quality such as developed for Open Education Resources (OER). Establishing objectives and aligning webinars to existing standards for students (for example, Common Core, Next Generation Science Standards and inTASC new teacher standards) are also necessary steps toward accepted parameters of quality. As these types of recognition are developed, all education stakeholders, including teacher preparation programs, increasingly will accept and support independent online professional learning communities. Professors, preservice and in-service teachers can then discern the

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value of a webinar, moderated discussion or online resource and recommend them to students and peers based on accepted expertise and educational usefulness.

Filtering and privacy are also issues that need to be addressed. Independent online networks such as Facebook and Ning are frequently blocked in schools and districts. Even access to webinar platforms can be blocked in some schools. Privacy issues are a key priority of district administrators. There are no consistent policies in place across educational institutions, and that will continue for the foreseeable future. Preservice teachers, who become accustomed to using independent online networks in their teacher preparation program, will find themselves in schools with varying policies.

In Conclusion

For more than 20 years, teacher educators, in collaboration with preservice and in-service teachers, have experimented with using electronic communications and resources to connect preservice and in-service educators to promote professional learning and communication and reduce isolation. Research has underlined the value of such connectivity. Closed university-based communities, however, have experienced a variety of challenges that have compromised sustainable participation as students leave the university and begin their careers as new teachers. Access to independent online communities may well be one of the most powerful vehicles fueling a pathway to participation that not only supports preservice teachers, but also offers mutual benefits to all educators. There are obstacles and challenges to over-come, but educators who are connecting with peers through online communities are finding access to ideas, resources, expertise, experiences, and support that can be very motivating and rewarding, and improve teaching and learning on a global scale.

Inquiries and Comments

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About edWeb.net

edWeb.net is a free professional learning and social network that makes it easy for educators to connect and collaborate, share information and best practices, and create professional learning communities. edWeb hosts online professional learning communities for educators to connect with peers and experts all around the country and the world on the most innovative and progressive areas in education such as game-based learning, mobile learning, tech tools for the classroom, digital citizenship, Common Core Standards, new teacher help, and more. edWeb programs get high praise and participation by offering free webinars, online chats and discussions, archived resources, and certificates of completion. Schools and districts lack the time, expertise, and funding to provide the professional development educators need — edWeb fills that gap. Learn more at www.edweb.net or follow us on Twitter @edwebnet.

About Knowledge Without Borders

Since 2007, Knowledge Without Borders™ has explored ideas and actions of people and organizations, making new connections to leverage resources, to develop new systems and to find innovative solutions. Knowledge Without Borders is continually evolving in its exploration of innovation in education, entrepreneurship, and philanthropy. Dr. Karen Collias, the founder, has a Ph.D. from Columbia University in political science and international education. She has worked as a policy analyst at the U.S. Department of State, an editor at USA TODAY, a visiting lecturer at Princeton University, and as deputy director of the Smithsonian Institution's Science Center. Learn more at www.knowwithoutborders.org.

About MCH Strategic Data

MCH Strategic Data is a leading source of compiled data on education, health, and government institutions in the United States. MCH is a privately owned company that has been in the education market for over 80 years. The company was founded by Dr. Forrest E. Long who created The Clearing House, a journal for principals to exchange ideas and debate educational practices. MCH is a strategic partner of edWeb.net in part as a tribute to the legacy of Dr. Long, an educator and innovator who believed in the power of sharing information and ideas. MCH makes it possible for edWeb to reach 3.5 million K-12 educators in the U. S. to create awareness of edWeb's free network and professional learning programs. Visit the MCH Strategic at www.mchdata.com.

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