Transformative Professional Development in Unlikely Places: Twitter as a Virtual Learning Community

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: This case study reveals new dimensions of transformative learning occurring through informal learning opportunities. The research results demonstrate that the individual's learning spans understanding, networking, professional identity development, and transformative learning. Specifically, virtual online communities facilitated through social media provide professional networks and social relationships beyond the scope of the individual's usual interactions and experience. Discussion and recommendations include using social media and virtual communities as instructional strategies for graduate studies and continued learning beyond formal education. The educational significance includes facilitating transformative learning in informal learning contexts, and using social media and online communities for professional learning.

Introduction

Building upon the robust literature of learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Senge, 1994), King and Stewart (In press) propose a model of online and virtual spaces as transformative learning communities. This study explores a case in which a graduate student engaged in informal learning through an online (primarily based in Twitter) community and experienced transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Specifically, the virtual community greatly advanced her professional learning, preparation, understanding and appreciation of a specific mental health diagnosis and related treatments.

Discussions with colleagues led to this research project, in which I reviewed the student's postings, journal entries and recorded her account of her journey. This information was analyzed for specific evidence of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990; O'Sullivan, 2000) and how these experiences inform new uses of virtual communities for professional development. Recognizing the contextual fit of learning and research (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006), the mental health context of professional learning is especially appropriate for examining transformative learning through virtual spaces as the field has been legitimately conducted online (IMHSO, 1997; Kraus & Zack, 2003) for several years.

Background

The literature of professional development has included frequent examination of the transformative learning (TL) experiences of teachers and faculty in formal settings (Brock, 2007, 2010; Cranton, 1996, 2009; King, 2002, 2003). It reveals that, in supportive and safe environments, professional development can serve as a TL opportunity (Cranton, 2006; King,

2002, Kitchenham, 2006) New perspectives of teaching gained through TL impact professionals and their practice (King & Cranton, 2003; Kitchenham). Several studies identify how adult learners experience TL through online courses: both faculty (Lari, 2008) and students (Wasnick, 2007). This research demonstrates the potential for meaningful TL professional development within virtual, informal learning. Expanding our study of TL and formal education, this study expands our concept of learning and TL research to informal learning.

Distance learning research demonstrates how to construct and facilitate meaningful learning communities online (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Stewart, 2008). At the core of these virtual learning relationships are the essential and familiar principles and practices of socially constructed knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978), social discourse in learning, and situated learning (Lave &Wenger, 1991).

In addition, research and literature on "cyberculture" has been growing in sociology, philosophy and information sciences since the 1970s (Bell, 2006; Levy, 1999, 2001). This literature documents efforts to frame the similarities and differences among face to face relationships and those hosted solely online. In addition, it tracks the rapid development of technology, online communities and social adoption during this time (Bingham, & Conner, 2010). In 2005-2007, there was an enormous public adoption of social media: not only was the general public using online resources for accessing information, but they were now using social media to communicate with colleagues, friends and relatives (I.e., Facebook, Twitter, etc), to strengthen networks (i.e., LinkedIn, Ning, Tumblr, etc) and as illustrated in this study, extend their learning communities (Bingham, & Conner, 2010).

This research extends prior work on formal distance learning and cyberculture to informal learning contexts, revealing new opportunities for building beneficial global, virtual professional learning environments. The results demonstrate that professional learning gained through a virtual community does not need to be a focused effort of every participant, but may be as simple as self-directed, professional and academic curiosity through virtual social discourse.

Research Method and Data Collection

One valid use of the case study method is for examination of a new phenomenon; such research can provide direction for more specific analysis in the future (Merriam, 1997; Yin, 2009). Case study is used as the methodology and frame for this research, and a wide variety of data was collected. I gathered and analyzed the primary participant's journal entries, transcripts of twitter logs of the community, instant message/chat between the participant and some community members, and an interview with the main subject of the study, "Patty." Qualitative analysis consisted of constant comparison until exhaustion (saturation) of discovery and identification of themes (Janesick, 2007).

Participants
The primary participant in this study is a woman, "Patty." She completed her BA in psychology; in 2008: she was in her 40's. The next semester she began her MSW focusing on mental health therapy. An accomplished professional prior to the financial crisis of 2008, it is not surprising that Patty focuses on and dedicates herself to her studies. For example, she pursued additional reading, career related volunteer opportunities, and association memberships to advance her career even during semesters. To learn more about her new profession, Patty began reading several blogs about a specific acute mental health disorder.

The other participants in the study were involved indirectly. They were Patty's virtual learning community members. She met them through topic-related blogs topic and began following them in those blogs and on Twitter. Gradually, frequent correspondence progressed among a group who had informally gathered around a common mental health topic. One curious and powerful element of this group is that some were licensed professionals, others (like Patty) were unlicensed but interested in the topic, and several had the mental health disease. This study examines Patty's professional learning experience in this virtual community, and she was the only participant directly contacted for this research study.

Patty agreed to participate in this study on one condition: that the identity of her online community would not be revealed and thereby compromise their dynamic support system. In order to accomplish this goal, in all written accounts I use a pseudonym for "Patty," do not identify the acute mental disorder she studied, nor the specific blogs, Twitter lists and identities, etc. she follows for this purpose. All participants remain anonymous in this research account.

Findings and Analysis

The data revealed that over the 14 months (2009-2011) Patty dialogued with this international virtual community, she gained substantial learning and insight. The dialogues provide informative descriptions of the depth and nature of the communication, relationships and learning.

Some of the most profound examples of these continuing online conversations include (1) Patty's online discussions with mental health sufferers' served as primary sources to learn about their conditions (they initiated the discussions about their experiences), (2) how she learned from the ways the mental health sufferers' described their situations, (3) the ways Patty actively examined professional ethical boundaries, and (4) cross-cultural understanding built through boundary less dialogue with people from many different cultures.

There were many benefits of this informal virtual community for Patty's professional development (PD). Analysis results are displayed in Table 1. It indicates 10 discrete examples labeled with the theme "benefits" and two composite developments of greater professional understanding.

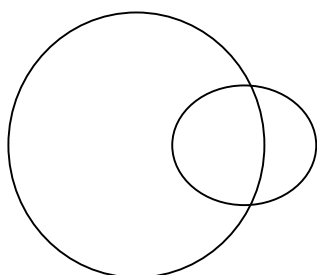| Table 1: PD Benefits of Informal Virtual Community	Composite
1. Expanding scope of social network diversity beyond the customary social network to a virtual network	
2. Developing cross-cultural understanding as she dialogued with people from many different cultures	
3. Learning from personal accounts of people with severe mental health conditions	Essential Additional Skills Development which will advance professional role
4. Developing dialogue practice and strategies to be supportive of people with mental health conditions	
5. Developing reflective practice techniques to comprehend needs	
6. Developing reflective practice techniques to develop appropriate responses	
7. Developing additional skills in etiquette, cautions, and difficulties in written communication regarding	

delicate and emotion-laden topics.	
8. Building appreciation for and sense of boundaries in mental health support roles	
9. Appreciating many ethical quandaries licensed practitioners encounter based on accounts of participants (while not disclosing opinions).	Professional Identity Development
10. Recognizing the extensive support licensed practitioners must provide mental health clients with acute diagnoses.	

Regarding Professional Skill Development, these characteristics will help Patty succeed as a mental health therapist. The situated learning experience provides a vibrant opportunity for *praxis* which is often missing from formal education. The professional identity development is similar to that which is often experienced through structured internships. The benefit here is that the virtual community provides opportunities which exceed the experiences available locally. In addition it provides greater flexibility for involvement as the learner can interact with the community members anytime, anyplace.

There is a double dimension to Patty's professional learning; she learned (1) *about* the mental health condition and people, and (2) *how to* support people in a nonclinical relationship. In the literature of transformative learning, many times the theoretical framework of the domains of knowledge are discussed (Cranton, 2002). Using this paradigm, it is evident that Patty's learning spanned both communicative learning (how to support people) and emancipatory learning. Patty's greater understanding and appreciative for the life situations of these mental health suffers was emancipatory as it opened new dimensions of experience.

In addition, Patty described what emerged as a "profound" qualitative benefit from the primary source nature of the experience: she learned about life with this mental health diagnosis from the people who live with it rather than second-hand accounts. Sometimes, mental health workers have friends or family with certain conditions with which they then gain greater familiarity and knowledge. As illustrated in Figure 1, Patty broadened her circle of relationships through a virtual community. She used this opportunity to engage in self-directed reflection and learning.

Figure 1 Scope of Social Networks: Customary and Potential in Virtual Spaces

Using the lens of transformative learning to examine the data, TL stages and final perspective transformation are clear. The TL model illuminates Patty's disorienting dilemma when she privately questioned her prior experience vs. what she read posted by this virtual group.

The first time some of the mental health participants posted their concerns while experiencing their conditions, she thought they were joking around. Quickly though when the same conversations turned to serious matters of violence, she realized "OK, this is not what I thought it was. This behavior is part of the disease, not a joke."

As noted by Zaro, Barach, Nedelman, and Dreiblatt (1997), experienced clinicians develop skills to recognize the shifts in communication among clients with such conditions as major depression, manic-depression, psychoses, schizophrenia, dissociative identify disorder, and other mental health disorders. However, the general public, students, and beginning therapists are less adept with identifying the patterns and find them confusing, even frustrating.

TL theory reveals another stage in Patty's learning journey as she negotiated relationships in her learning. Specifically, she had to build professional and personal understanding among the participants through dialogue.

Patty said "I was sure to let them know I was accepting of what they were going through. I didn't make a big deal of it, although I would ask questions and express concern. I took an approach of letting them tell me, letting them offer information, rather than probing. I was aware it was much slower than I would usually learn about someone. I felt it was more appropriate to wait for them to be ready to talk to me."

Indeed, the other community members' trust and confidence in Patty became evident when several invited her to join their private, password-protect blogs. It was in these private spaces that they posted their more personal insights and struggles. Patty would leave general public comments which were supportive and encouraging. At times, she would also email or privately post the author her support.

Over time, she learned that many of these same people also posted on Twitter and Facebook. As she followed them (befriended them online to see their public posts), they reciprocated by following her public Twitter posts. In this study, this community did not use Facebook as much as Twitter.

The Twitter conversations tended to be less formal and took several forms: (1) general public posts to anyone "listening", (2) posts continuing conversations among their small group of people interested in this mental health condition, and (3) direct messages to individuals in the informal group.

Examining social media dialogue, such as the dialogue Patty experienced and its resultant virtual community, there are striking findings to parallel potential introductory/informal internship settings. For instance, Patty now recognizes that she used a positive psychology approach by focusing discussions on constructive rather than destructive issues (Linley & Joseph, 2004). The conversations often centered on mental health disease; therefore, it was important also that trust and transparency were developed through dialogue (Zaro, Barach, Nedelman, & Dreiblatt, 1997).

Discussion

Ethics

Based on Pattys' account, it is essential to emphasize two framing findings from this study (1) Patty exercised great caution to interact in a non-clinical role, not as a mental health worker, in her communications and (2) she greatly respected the privacy and concerns of the people who

shared their lives with her. Based on additional literary research conducted, these tenets are core guidelines for such professional learning to succeed ethically.

Major examples of Patty's ethical awareness and actions include (1) her insistence on identifying and responding as a student and friend and not offering any counseling, and (2) her concern for the privacy of her virtual community members throughout this research.

Self-Directed

At this point in time, the method of pursuing professional learning through social media runs contrary to the way that most people have been educated. Traditional education follows a pattern of teacher-directed, formal instruction. The successful approach in this case study was self-directed and informal learning. And this self-directed learning will be the successful means to keep pace with the constantly changing expansion of new knowledge (Bingham, & Conner, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006), and will be powerful lifelong professional development to continue advance formal learning far beyond the classroom.

Context is Important

Most people do not eagerly seek change into an uncertain future (Fullan, 2005; King 2003). Just considering the complexities and barriers of introducing change and innovation among organizations is substantial proof of this enduring aversion to risk.

However, in the mental health field some professionals have adopted online technologies for conducting therapy with clients. Therefore, at this time, this professional community provides a receptive and ready context to accept and even seek professional learning within this setting (ISMHSO, 1997). Other professions, less welcoming towards online technologies, might not be as well-suited for this adoption, and this may hinder or require specific approaches to introduce professional learning through such media.

Recommendations, Future Research and Significance

Recommendations for Practice

This study provides the opportunity to consider virtual and social media communities viable internship or practice spaces for professionals in a host of fields. The transformative learning Patty experienced resulted in a profound change in her professional and personal awareness. Such ongoing professional learning could be indispensable for interns and experienced practitioners in providing situated rather than solely theoretical learning. By incorporating such communicative and emancipatory learning into professional development, there would also be greater opportunities for new insights, refreshment and persistence.

However this study also illustrates that Patty exercised substantial degrees of compassion and ethical awareness. Incorporating these practices, identified as key themes in this case, would be essential for successful professional learning though social media which upholds the ethical codes of the social sciences (i.e., APA, NASW, ACA). If faculty or organizations decide to encourage social media as professional learning, they need to be certain that this critical issues are explored and understood by "students" prior to embarking on activities. In addition to the immediate learning they will gain from involvement in such training in "virtual communication literacy," students will have broad based benefits throughout their careers from learning appropriate and wise choices.

Finally, another application of this study is to consider how incorporation of virtual communities for professional learning could impact formal and informal professional learning across different fields. If faculty introduced these strategies in graduate courses, professionals could dialogue continuously with new and current colleagues, rather than waiting for annual conferences and facing enduring isolation.

Moreover, people equipped with this paradigm and practice of virtual learning communities could expand their learning network through first-hand contact with experts and colleagues within their specialty or additional areas. Additionally, social media and virtual learning communities provide an ever-expanding social network which provides practice in communication, empathy and appreciation of varied circumstances, and in this case conditions, beyond customary family, friends and geographical boundaries.

Future Research

Building upon what is known about online communities and facilitating their development (Senge, 1994), providing respectful environment (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, 2005), and building trust (Cranton, 2002), this study opens the door for a new level of research and implementation for informal professional learning in virtual contexts. Several possibilities for research which stem from this study include examining: (1) the benefits and means of using virtual community discussion (or their transcripts) as an authentic context for understanding professional ethics; (2) greater breadth and variation of experiences of virtual professional learning among social service students, (3) outcomes and means for creating virtual simulations to incorporate such experiences in formal training, (4) whether there are similar professional learning benefits using this same format among other occupations, and (5) feasibility and means to support mental health learning, and needs through greater global networks.

Significance

Sometimes, educators look fruitlessly for meaningful ways to connect real-life application for new students or novices. This research demonstrates that informal virtual communities can be valuable vehicles for professional learning in receptive contexts. The potential of blending social media technologies, with informal and situated learning, opens new dimensions of professional learning possibilities for many fields. Moreover, the potential of transformative learning experiences through self-direction could address vital needs for continuing professional refreshment, renewal and persistence.

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