



Tapping the Wealth of Social Networks for Professional Development

Last fall, when *New York Times* technology writer David Pogue wanted to learn about the advantages and disadvantages of Twitter, he turned to his network, sending “tweets” to 1,900 followers. He found that social networking, if not used judiciously, could be a massive time-absorber, but he also found that technologies such as Twitter could be a “brilliant channel for breaking news, asking questions, and attaining one step of separation from public figures you admire. No other communications channel can match its capacity for real-time, person-to-person broadcasting.” In his January 15, 2009, blog post, “Twittering Tips for Beginners,” Pogue wrote:

A few months ago, I was one of 12 judges for a MacArthur grant program in Chicago. As the judges looked over one particular application, someone asked, “Hasn’t this project been tried before?” Everyone looked blankly at each other. Then the guy sitting next to me typed into the Twitter box. He posed the question to his followers. Within 30 seconds, two people replied, via Twitter, that it had been done before. And they provided links.

The fellow judge had just harnessed the wisdom of his followers in real time. No e-mail, chat, Web page, phone call, or FedEx package could have achieved the same thing.

I was impressed.

Today, information and communication technologies such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter are some of the most popular technologies available on the Internet, with millions of users worldwide, but research is still trying to discover

how we use them, for what purposes, and in what settings, and investigate how they may be shaping the ways we think, work, and communicate.

Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* examines the ways in which such technologies available over the Internet enable extensive forms of collaboration that may have transformative consequences for the economy and for society. He argues that through emerging forms of online participation, we can not only publicize our opinions, and so have a hand in shaping our democratic culture, but also become more critical, self-reflective, and collectively intelligent.

If this is true, as reflective practitioners, how do we start enjoying the wealth of networks—tapping our collective intelligence—for our own personal and professional development in education? In our increasingly online world, can we get a little help from our friends?

A recent and thorough review of the professional development research literature from one of the education field’s top journals, *Review of Educational Research*, argues that in terms of technology professional development for educators, we still have a long way to go in understanding methods of effective practice: “We need to move to a more systematic study of how technology integration occurs within our schools, what increases its adoption among students and teachers, and the long-term impacts that these investments have on both teachers’ and students’ learning.”

Moreover, the research on teachers’ uses of the kinds of freely available, online-all-the-time social digital technologies that Benkler and others

Christine Greenhow

Christine Greenhow is a Harvard-trained educational researcher and former school teacher at the University of Minnesota, where her work focuses on how people learn, teach, and collaborate with emerging technologies such as social network sites.

Learn more at www.cgreenhow.org.

are writing about (social networking sites, blogs, wikis, microblogging services, videocasting, and audiocasting) is only now emerging.

So, without a tremendous research base from which to draw, permit me to describe two of the trends in using these tools to develop professionally and socially that I and my colleagues see happening, based on our own research.

First, social bookmarking sites, such as Delicious, Diigo, and CiteULike, can provide the resources to facilitate a scholarly approach to teaching where teachers concerned with developing research-based best practices can collectively assemble, annotate, recommend, and share scholarly resources, such as books, journal articles, websites, and contacts. Social scholarly practices leverage and archive our collective intelligence.

According to library media scholar Laura Cohen, social scholarship operates on principles such as “openness, conversation, collaboration, access, sharing, and transparent revision.” As educators reflect on what it means to take a scholarly approach to their teaching, their use of these social bibliography tools may, in turn, provide greater insight into their own attitudes and teaching practices (e.g., what it means to teach “the research paper” in the presence of social scholarship tools). For more on this topic, please see “Social scholarship: Applying social networking technologies to research practices” (Greenhow, 2009) and “Web 2.0 and Educational Research: What Path Do We Take Now?” (Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes, in press).

Second, social networking tools, such as Facebook, Classroom 2.0, Ning, and Twitter, can be used to garner collective emotional support and recognition for one’s creative practices. We all know that teaching is hard

work, and it typically happens behind closed doors. Such social networking services allow many-to-many broadcasting, previously only afforded to the privileged few, so that classroom ideas, questions, or puzzles, such as Pogue’s, can be quickly circulated through a vast network, putting others’ problem-solving skills and political acumen to work for you.

Broadcasting the anecdotal evidence you are gathering from classroom teaching to a private or semi-private network can not only help teachers reflect on their practice to trouble shoot and improve it, but also can help teachers garner recognition for their good work. And, of course, with recognition may come more opportunities for professional development (such as grants, time off for projects, and leadership positions).

In our work studying the potential educational benefits and challenges of social network site use among urban teenagers, we found that such technologies could function as social learning resources and spaces for new literacy practices. For instance, some young people put up their creative work (a video they made, creative writing in their blog, photography, etc.) on MySpace and in turn receive recognition and feedback in the form of kudos, comments, tags, or friends being invited to view their work. Many students felt this peer validation and appreciation encouraged them to be even more creative, clever, and articulate in their online self-presentation, and we saw actual examples of this in their online work.

In addition, they turned to their social network site to get emotional support and school-related task support from online friends and peers during tough times, such as transitioning to college or working on a

stressful assignment. See Greenhow and Robelia (in press) for more specific illustrations that may spark ideas for teachers, as well.

For more on how these networks are creating social learning opportunities for young people in high school, please see <http://apps.facebook.com/hotdish>, a news-sharing community within Facebook focused on environmental science, literacy, and social activism.

Although these are just some of the ways we might get a little help from our friends along our own professional development journeys, they are meant as a starting point for further discussion. To that end, I invite you to “friend” me on Facebook, tweet to me on Twitter (www.twitter.com/chrisgreenhow), message me on the ISTE Community Ning (www.iste-community.org), or find me in the halls of NECC 2009.

Resources

CiteULike example: www.citeulike.org/user/davidbrake

Diigo article: http://schoolcomputing.wikia.com/wiki/Why_We_Like_Diigo

“Informal Learning and Identity Formation in Online Social Networks” by C. Greenhow and E. Robelia (in press). *Learning, Media and Technology*.

Pogue’s Posts, “Twittering Tips for Beginners”: <http://pogue.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/twittering-tips-for-beginners>

“Professional Development in Integrating Technology into Teaching and Learning: Knowns, Unknowns, and Ways to Pursue Better Questions and Answers” by K. A. Lawless and J. W. Pellegrino (2007). *Review of Educational Research*, 77(4).

“Research on Learning and Teaching with Web 2.0: Bridging Conversations” by C. Greenhow, E. Robelia, & J. Hughes (in press). *Educational Researcher*.

“Social Scholarship: Applying Social Networking Technologies to Research Practices” by C. Greenhow (2009). *Knowledge Quest* 37(4).

“Social scholarship on the rise” by L. Cohen (2007, April 5): <http://liblogs.albany.edu/library20>

“Web 2.0 and Educational Research: What Path Do We Take Now?” by C. Greenhow, E. Robelia, and J. Hughes (in press). *Educational Researcher*.

Social networking tools can be used to garner collective emotional support and recognition for one’s creative practices.