



The Use of Social Media as a Tool for Building Teacher Expertise through Bridging and Bonding

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Abstract

The collective case study research aimed to investigate how school culture, internal factors, and state of flow influence teachers' motivation to develop teaching expertise. The study is an ongoing project. One of the significant findings was that experts in the teaching profession focus on improving their weaknesses in content, pedagogy, or social-emotional attributes to enhance student learning. These experts are motivated by their Teacher-Student Kinship, which represents a family-like relationship between teachers and students.

Moreover, the study revealed that expert teachers build professional learning networks based on their perceived weaknesses and seek to improve them continually. They form bonds with their peers within their school, but they also bridge with peers outside their school using various social media and technological tools. This process of bonding and bridging has become more accessible with the advancement of technology, allowing experts to develop Professional Kinship and enhance their practice regardless of their location and proximity with peers within their professional learning community.

The implications of these findings are significant for theory, practice, and future research, particularly in the realm of teacher quality and the standards of education. These findings suggest that the change of mindset towards the teaching profession is crucial to attract and retain quality teachers. It is also essential to encourage the use of social media and other technological tools to facilitate the building of professional learning networks and enhance the teaching profession's quality. Future research should continue to investigate the role of Teacher-Student Kinship, Professional Kinship, and other internal factors in motivating teachers to develop expertise and improve student learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Teacher-Student Kinship; Professional Kinship; Flow; Professional Learning; social media*

1. Introduction

While teachers have traditionally sought development opportunities through professional organizations, conferences, and higher education, the emergence of online communities has provided a new avenue for professional learning. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for teachers to develop expertise in virtual teaching and to seek out resources to navigate this new reality. This study is a continuation of an initial study completed in 2021. The researchers have followed 20 YouTube vloggers for the past three years and recently started following ten teacher influencers on TikTok. The aims of the study were to explore the content and engagement of the influences and vloggers shared on their preferred social media platforms. Additionally, the study was designed to understand how influencers used agency [9], [10], [16] to increase their social capital through engagement in online teacher communities on social media platforms [8].

Agency is a teacher's capacity to manage their own professional learning intentionally and responsively, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom with the goal of increasing their student's learning [9], [10], [16]. Agency is demonstrated in the teachers' will and motivation to learn, their self-efficacy beliefs about learning, and intentional activities towards learning in classroom [2], [17], [18]. A teacher's social capital includes the networks and relationships that are critical to their professional learning [12], [15], [16].

Successful teachers are those who have strong agency to support their own learning and who also develop strong professional capital to bridge and bond with other successful professionals. Etelapelto [3] suggests agency allows professionals to impact choices and make decisions that affect their work and identities. Teachers who have agency, are more likely engage as part of the collective community of learners [4], [16].

The study distinguishes between bonding, or peer networks and relationships within the school, and bridging, or networks and relationships outside of the school [15]. Online communities have made it easier for teachers to bridge professional learning opportunities, both formally and



informally organized, and to remove the barriers of distance [1], [5], [6], [7], [11], [14], [19]. However, in the original study, Mayeaux & Olivier [8] found the viewers were seeking specific information and not truly forming relationships with peers.

The study emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of how, what, and why teachers use online communities for professional learning, through both bonding and bridging. The results of this study could inform the development of more effective professional development programs, both within schools and through online communities.

2. Methods

The collective case study design was chosen to explore how teachers use social media to bond and bridge to create social capital. Twenty YouTube channels have been tracked over the past four years for viewership, videos posted, and the content of the videos. Additionally, the connections to other platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, as well as monetary platforms were examined. The qualitative collective case study focused on the social media presence of teachers, who are followed by others for their teaching expertise. Lantz-Anderson et al. (2018) shares the development of informal teacher networks via social media have grown over the past twenty years. Over the past three years, these twenty channels have grown in engagement, particularly as teachers seek information about teaching virtually and using technology resources.

The twenty YouTube vloggers and the ten TikTok influencers were chosen based on four criteria related to their individual channels: (1) over one-million views, (2) at least ten-thousand subscribers, (3) managed by a classroom teacher, as opposed to an organization or school; and 4) focused primarily on the lives of teachers. The teachers ranged from teaching pre-school to high school subjects. All information is publicly accessible, and all vloggers remain anonymous in this study.

Three research questions were formed to drive the study. The questions were related to questions suggested in multiple studies to better appreciate the professional learning activities in casual online learning communities [6], [7], [19].

- Research Question 1: What content do teachers/influencers share on social media?
- Research Question 2: What does the content reveal about teacher agency?
- Research Question 3: What does the content reveal about building social capital?

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was applied, including analyzing demographic data, video content, and viewer engagement, to identify themes and patterns from response in the top viewed videos. The study ensured anonymity of all participants and was used only publicly.

3. Results

Eleven of the YouTube channels focused on the experiences of elementary teachers, while nine were middle and high school teachers. The least experienced currently has eight years of teaching, while six have over 15 years of experience. Eighteen teachers were from public and private schools in the United States. The sample included both male and female teachers.

Eight of the ten TikTok influencers were elementary school teachers with the others being middle and high school teachers. Experience was hard to judge as were their schools. There was anonymity with the influencers. Nine of the TikTok influencers also appear to be under the age of 30 and relatively new to the profession. One was a veteran teacher with over twenty years of experience.

The 20 channels in the casual online learning community had a wide range of engagement, with the highest number of subscribers at 824,000 and the lowest at 41,000. The highest number of views was 10 million and the lowest was 2,300. The channels varied in age, with the oldest one starting in 2008 and the newest one in 2020. Overall, these channels have a broad reach and are engaging with individuals from around the world. The videos ranged from under 2 minutes to 76 minutes. The most popular videos ranged from 15 to 20 minutes.

The 10 TikTok channels in the casual online learning community had a wide range of engagement, with the highest number of subscribers at 5.6 million and the lowest at 376,000. The highest number of views was 62 million and the lowest was 393,000. The range number of views for all 10 channels was between 5.8 million to 160 million. Overall, these channels have a broad reach and are engaging with individuals from around the world. The videos were mostly under 2 minutes, but TikTok has allowed for maximum ten-minute videos as of January 2023.

The information shared on You-Tube was shaped by gender and level. Most of the teachers were female, elementary level teachers. Their videos focused on classroom management and classroom



set up tips. These teachers used a personal connection style with the viewers and shared things like where to buy comfortable shoes or what to bring for lunch. These teachers were also savvier about monetizing their videos by connecting viewers to content for purchase.

The secondary teachers were predominately male. These teachers focused primarily on tech tips and content-based lesson ideas. Their style was very straight-forward with clear how-to guides for completing tasks. They were less likely to engage with their faces showing and use their own classroom space. These teachers also did not monetize as much as the elementary teachers, which may be in part that the content was not particularly student work-based such as worksheets or organization tools.

The content shared on TikTok was primarily humorous about the life of teachers, funny shorts about students and their classroom, parody about daily life of a teacher, and political commentary. Content that focused on professional learning was limited, but when shared the information was about organization of classroom and quick tips and tricks such as exit tickets.

Over the past two years more of the teachers have started using TikTok. Of the twenty YouTubers, only one had a significant following on TikTok. Thirteen of the thirty of the teachers connected their other sites for product endorsements and monetization. Two of the teachers have left the profession and are solely focused on their self-described “side-hustle” as a career.

4. Findings

Distinct differences in content existed between the content shared via YouTube and TikTok. While the creators of the channels demonstrated agency, the focus was uniquely different. The YouTube findings demonstrated the importance of collaboration and shared learning among teachers, as well as the impact of the information shared about their teaching practice. Conversely, the TikTok influencers were more focused on demonstrating their own personal creative outlet rather than focusing on professional learning.

Overall, the YouTube videos focused primarily on providing practical tips and tools for teachers, with a particular emphasis on tech tools and virtual teaching strategies. There was also a significant focus on organizing the classroom for better student engagement and providing tips for teachers to improve their personal and professional lives. Interestingly, there were both graduate programs and companies sponsoring the videos, and the monetization of the content was openly discussed. The diversity of topics covered in the videos suggests that teachers are eager to share their knowledge and experiences with others, and that there is an interesting sense of community among teachers on these channels. Viewers of the channels also highlighted the importance of reflection and sharing of best practices to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The willingness of teachers to share their experiences and results also contributes to the growth of the teaching profession, but there were limited personal relationships formed.

Based on the analysis of the YouTube top videos and comments, there are more lurkers than active participants in the online community of teachers using social media. Most viewers watch the videos for information and resources, but do not actively engage in dialogue or discussion beyond expressing appreciation or providing a few suggestions. While the videos offer useful ideas for addressing various teaching issues, the direct building of social capital through the channels is not clear.

The TikToks made by the teacher influencers are primarily of entertainment value. The content ranged from funny sketches about parent teacher conferences to quick dances with the students. Eight TikTok influencers created humorous and political TikToks. They received most of their interactions from viewers for parody sketches and political commentary videos about current events affecting education. The humorous videos are designed to engage in clicks and followers. Such videos were the most likely to be shared to others via the platform ranging from 5,000-10,000. When these influencers shared specific teacher-type videos about things such as missing assignments in virtual platforms, the comments included things like “Nice dress” rather than engagement about professional learning. One of the influencers was focused on teaching content and creates short daily English lessons about grammar and punctuation. Another influencer shares short teaching tips to help students remember things. While these two teachers have the largest following, their videos have low numbers of shares ranging from 10-50 shares.

Overall, the study highlights the potential benefits and limitations of social media for teachers who share their expertise in various areas of teaching. Successful YouTube channels are focused on professionally related content. These teachers show agency in sharing their experiences, tips, and strategies for better serving students. TikTok influences are using agency, but the agency more about entertainment value rather than professional learning. While social media platforms offer opportunities

for teachers to connect with peers across the globe, share ideas, and improve their professional learning, the study found limited evidence of teachers forming true professional relationships or engaging in deep discussions about best pedagogical practices. Teachers are not building social capital or necessarily demonstrating agency. The monetization of content and the asynchronous nature of engagement on social media were also identified as potential barriers to forming these types of relationships.

5. Conclusions

Future research in this area could include an in-depth analysis of the follower responses and the content that creates have chosen to monetize. Ultimately, understanding how teachers use social media to pursue expertise and form professional relationships has important implications for improving teacher practice and student learning.

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