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SOCIAL MEDIA – NEW FORM OF LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Information and communication technologies are essential in the contemporary process of teaching - learning. Integrating social media in education is an alternative to support teaching and learning activities, both formally and informally. In Romania there is little empirical research on professional use of Social Media in the educational environment. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the dimensions of social media use in educational context as new form of learning community and their implications for professional development. The research method is based on a questionnaire survey. The instrument was created and administrated online using Survey Monkey. The questionnaire was created through qualitative research with two focus groups on the most important aspects of social media as a new learning community. In research participated 103 teachers (48 teachers from university level and 55 teachers who work with pre-university level). The results show that the use of ITC is in the process of transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Teachers exchange information, use social media platforms at different levels and contribute significant with original product in virtual environment.

Keywords: Teacher's learning; online communities; social media.

1. Introduction: The teacher as the subject of learning

Lifelong learning, systematic improvement of professional training is imperative in the teaching profession. The teacher is an important agent, through which younger generations can be shaped in order to effectively integrate in a dynamic, continuously changing society. For Romanian education to become a high-quality educational system is necessary for its principal actors, teachers, to own a set of social attitudes that enable engaging in high quality educational approaches (Gavreliuc, Gavreliuc, 2012). Research in this field shows that there is often a discrepancy between beliefs, attitudes of teachers and

teaching practices. Among the factors that influence the occurrence of this situation are: contextual constraints (e.g., curricular requirements, social pressure), competing beliefs, insufficient professional training, etc. (Li, 2016).

Some of transversal skills, highly valued in the labor market are the digital ones. We consider that teachers are the ones who should be the first to learn and use these skills in order to able to form individuals trained for the contemporary society. These "techno-pedagogical competences" (Guichon, Hauck, 2011, p. 189) enable teachers to deliver effectively, while utilizing the technical skills. Scientific literature highlights the contemporary situation in which teachers' uses technology and social media for personal use and less for educational purposes (Madge et al., 2009).

1.1. Teacher Training

Continuous training of the teachers in Romania is one of the directions to strengthen in the educational reform. This aims personal and socio-professional development of teachers, preparing them for the challenges of contemporary society, incorporating the principles of lifelong education. Teachers have the obligation to obtain every five years a minimum of 90 transferable professional credits. Acquiring them is ensured mostly through: methodical activities, by attending to scientific events (conferences, seminars, etc.) at the school level, county and national level, by attending to training courses, constituting into genuine learning communities. The main reasons why teachers learn are: to improve students' achievement, enrichment of teaching competences and accumulation of new knowledge (Dârjan, 2010).

A large part of these learning situations refer implicitly or explicitly to the digital skills of the teachers. Some allow the development, practicing these skills, but few ongoing training offers allow the blend of formal and / or non-formal learning experiences with informal ones. This connection between the forms of education enables the adult access to relevant learning experiences, impacting on teachers' beliefs and teaching strategies, sharing ideas with other professionals, reasoning, practices. For an optimal learning experience, the adult needs collaboration in a secure context, in which he/she can be actively involved, creative, experimenting, receiving feedback, in partnership between trainer and trainees (Dârjan, 2010).

1.2. Learning Community

The need for development and improvement of teachers has generated the creation of professional groups. Scientific literature defines them as "teacher teams" (Knapp, 2010), "teacher communities" (Little, 2003), or "teacher networks" (Lieberman, 2000), highlighting the role of social learning activities from these groups. We agree with the definition of social learning in teacher communities as: "undertaking (a series of) learning activities by teachers in collaboration with colleagues, resulting in a change in cognition and/ or behavior at the individual and/or group level" (Doppenberg, Bakx, Den Brok, 2012: 548-549). This definition highlights the constructive nature of these social learning activities representing the search for solutions to current and challenges, as well as the construction in a collaboratively manner of new concepts (Vrieling, Van den Beemt, De Laat, 2016)."Teams" are considered to be groups of coworkers, sharing a common goal. In order to describe informal social

groups, although presented as equivalent terms, the concepts of "community" and "network" are significantly different. "Community" emphasizes creating an identity around a shared concern and "network" highlights the set of connections which the individual creates (Wenger, Trayner, de Laat, 2011).

The structure of teacher groups who learn can take different forms depending on their developmental needs, taking the form of either a network or a community (Vrieling, Van den Beemt, De Laat, 2016). Learning through social interaction may improve practices (Van Maele, Moolenaar, Daly, 2015), add new values in knowledge area (Schechter, Sykes, Rosenfeld, 2008), and give the teachers a sense of collective identity (Vrieling, Van den Beemt, De Laat, 2016). Based on social capital theory, we argue that teachers form networks or take part of learning community to access new and shared relational resources (attitudes, knowledge, ideas, practices etc.). Learning communities and networks have new forms because of the advances in technology. These are extended beyond the physical space and grow in the virtual environment (Lord, Lomicka, 2008), making learning experiences more interactive and collaborative (Maor, 2003).

2. Social Media

2.1. Definitions, Characteristics

Social media is a revolutionary concept, defined in the broadest sense as "any online service through which users can create and share a variety of content" (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 248). A nearest perspective define the concept as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2012). Although some authors believe that Web 2.0 and social media terms are interchangeable (Dabbagh, Reo, 2011), in reality Web 2.0 is a platform that enables social media evolution "the ideological and technological foundation" of social media (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010). Under the name of Social media, the following are brought together: blogs and micro-blogging (Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Google, forums, etc.), communities that share information in different formats (audio, video) and collaborative projects (Wikipedia, Google doc, Edmodo, Prezi, etc.).

2.2. Social media and teaching

The use of social media in educational context exhibits strong effects on Collaborative Learning, helping in constructing knowledge and performing better in complex tasks (Zhang et al., 2015). The use of social media was studied in the past decades especially in relation to student learning approaches. Were revealed connections between social media use and development of positive attitudes towards learning (Kirschner, Karpinski, 2010), supporting student self-regulated learning (Dabbagh, Kitsantas, 2012), enrichment of cooperation and interaction between students and teachers (Qureshi, Raza, Whitty, 2015), developing communication competencies (Wright et al, 2013), developing interpersonal intelligence (Erez et al., 2013).

Compared with the so-called Generation Y (those born between 1981 and 1999) or digital natives (Bolton et. all, 2013; Popescul, Georgescu, 2016), previous generations are slightly reserved in using social media in social and professional activities.

Research shows that teachers use social media differently, depending on the country of origin and the learning environment in which they teach. Universities are more receptive to the use of social media in communicating with students (Ranieri, Manca, Fini, 2012, p. 757) compared with the staff that teaches in the undergraduate level (Grosseck, Malița, 2015). Developed countries frequently use social media in the professional field (Perrotta, 2013) compared to those still in development (Popescul, Georgescu, 2016). In developing countries, it was notice an increased use of electronic communication devices (phones, tablets, and laptops) with Internet access, but rather used for personal rather than professional use (Whyte, 2014). Although there are positive intentions in using social media in teaching, infrastructure and know-how are limited (Popa, Bazgan, Pălășan, 2015).

Studies concerning the use of social media in education was focused on: practice a differential pedagogy (Hew, 2011, p. 663), educational relations (Selwyn, 2009), the use there of as tools for e-learning (Qureshi, Raza, Whitty, 2014). Some recent topics in research investigated: the teachers' motivation to join an online learning community (Facebook groups) and their impact on the real professional life (Ranieri, Manca, Fini, 2012, p. 756), the interdisciplinary use of blogs in teachers education (Caldwell, Heaton, 2016), the role of online groups in supporting socialization among teachers (Edwards, Darwent, Irons, 2016, p. 420), the role social media plays in problem solving (Buus, 2012; Barber, King, Buchanan, 2015).

2.3. Social Media And Teacher's Learning Community

Being in a professional community means sharing a passion or develops your expertise by interacting with others. The online community of practice represents "socio-technological learning environments" that facilitate knowledge construction (Ozturk, Ozcinar, 2013). Although the way teachers learn has been a constant concern of educational research (Caldwell, Heaton, 2016), the influence and attractiveness exerts on teachers professional learning communities is less investigated. There were studied the reasons for which teachers are part of virtual communities (Trust, 2012), factors that influence the use of Information and Communication Technology (Mumtaz, 2000), the use of social media in teachers' training (Munoz, Pellegrini - Lafont, Cramer, 2014), the communication in social media environments (Li, Greenhow, 2015). All the reviewed research shows an insufficient explored field, an invitation for more investigation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Objective, Hypotheses, Methods, Instruments

This study investigates the use of social media for pedagogical rationale. Another aim is to investigate benefit and disadvantages that virtual communities have. Considering these objectives, the research has the following research questions:

a) What are the main factors that make teachers consider being part of professional Social Media communities?

b) In what ways were Social Media communities helps them to develop professional knowledge?

c) What are the advantages that determine teachers to use them for their teaching practice?

d) What are the limitations that prevent teachers from using them in daily pedagogical work?

The research method is based on a questionnaire survey. The instrument was created and administrated online using SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was created through qualitative research with two focus groups on the most important aspects of social media as a new learning community. One of the groups is consisted of 8 teachers, who teach in the university environment, and the other is consisted of 9 teachers who work in primary and secondary schools. Following the results of the focus groups the 4 investigated themes emerged, a number of 20 items, with 5 for each theme. To these were added 5 items aimed to investigate the socio-demographic factors (gender, age, teaching environment, experience in teaching, and science) and 5 items which reflected the types of social media use. In total the questionnaire reached a number of 30 items, rated on a Likert scale from 0 ("Not at all") to 5 ("In a high degree").

3.2. Participants

In research participated 103 teachers (48 teachers from university level and 55 teachers who work with pre-university level), who know and use social media. Out of the total participants, 79 (76.7%) were women and 24 (23.3%) are men. This reflects the female representatives' preference for this job. Age of the participants varies between 26 and 56 years. Thus, between 26-36 years are 80 (77.7%) participants, aged between 37 -46 years are 13 (12.6%) persons, between 47 -56 years are 10 (9.6%) subjects. The sample is relatively balanced in terms of experience in teaching. Thus, 20 (25%) of respondents stated that they have less than 10 years of experience, 40 (39%) teachers stated that they have less than 20 years of experience and 37 (36%) of people said they that they have over 20 years of teaching experience.

4. Results

The most used types of Social media are: networking platforms (100%), collaboration platforms (70%), image-video sharing platforms (56%) and blogging (26%). The most significant networks for teachers are: Facebook (97%), Google+ (89%), forums (63%), instant messaging (54%), Researchgate (40%) and Linkedin (35%).

Frequency of use of these platforms was one of the interest points of the study. The results show that more than ¾ of all participants (78%) use daily, at least one of the forms listed above. A weekly frequency of use was stated by 19% of subjects, and only 3% of them stated that they access of these platforms on a monthly basis.

Regarding the use of social media in teaching, research results show an interesting situation. Although all participants are consumers of social media, they are reserved in using these platforms in the teaching process. The vast majority (83%) use social media to communicate quickly with students and their parents, possibly to create a space for socializing with them, for easy democratization of teacher-student relations. The flow of communication is a largely unidirectional (from teacher to student). Teachers forward information, communicate, send tasks and control the activity of the formed groups, determining a formal situation, with a low degree of participation and commitment of the pupils or students. In the teaching process, very few use social media (27%), distributing materials to students, pupils, but the use during the instruction time is extremely low. Regarding evaluation, none of the participants use social media. 40% of them transmit the results of knowledge tests through those platforms.

Apart from how these tools are handled, the focus of the research is related to goals which determine adherence to social media's learning community to which teachers are part of. The questionnaire has four sections, aimed at: factors that influence the presence in these online communities, the main aspects regarding professional development that social media communities facilitates, advantages and limitations of using this medium.

Determinants of teachers' presence in social media are: personal promotion, ensuring visibility (49%), concerns forenhancing learning by engaging students (17%), modeling practice (16%), searching and promote active collaboration (15%) and shared values and vision (3%).

Concerns for professional development determines teachers to seek in a large proportion (38%) in the online environment fast connection firsts, quick ways to connect to news in their field, access to innovative ideas and new perspectives of analysis and interpretation of problems, the timely knowledge of events and professional events (22%), problem solving in real context was chosen by 19% of participants, transfer of ideas in practice fostering reflexivity (17%), motivator role of belonging to a competitive professional group (4%).

The main advantages are highlighted: promotion of the person or institution (40%), sharing information, promotion of scientific events, training opportunities (39%), obtaining support, feed-back, advise and collaboration opportunities (14%), creation of teaching resources (5%),sense of belonging (2%).

Disadvantages of using social media for professional purposes, perceived by teachers are ranked as follows: lack of privacy (39%), lack of or limited access of many teachers to the technologies and digital media (37%), lack or limited knowledge of know-how for creating online material (13%), the issue of accountability (6%), the superficiality of many of those who post, reflected in inappropriate publishing and uploading (5%).

5. Conclusion

The results show that the use of ITC is in the process of transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Teachers exchange information, use social media platforms at different levels and contribute significant with original product in virtual environment. A large part of the teachers who participated in this study are rather consumers than creators of social media content. Teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards this environment, and would like to use it more intensively, especially in teaching. The main reasons for restraint in the use of social media as a real learning community environment are: lack of confidence in the veracity of information, fear of self-discover, limited abilities to protect their identity, insufficient information literacy.

5.1. Implications. Discussions. Limitations

The study is meant to be an invitation to the competent forums to create the necessary leverage to encourage the founding of online learning communities for teachers. Low costs, accessibility, the independence which it provides, many other advantages make them attractive opportunities for real democratization of communication, support and professional development of all teachers, regardless of where they teach. The research has some limitations, the small number of participating subjects, their lack

of representativeness.Therefore the results cannot be generalized, but calls for research on the phenomenon on a larger scale, on Romanian population.

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