

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE INTERNET — A STUDY OF THE SWEDISH INFORMAL ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY LEKTION.SE

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Abstract

Membership in online learning communities provides teachers possibilities to continuously reflect upon and deepen their understandings of the teaching profession. In this article a Swedish online learning community, called lektion.se, is focused and some early findings from an ongoing larger project aimed at understanding teachers' use lektion.se for their professional development is presented. The purpose in this paper is to investigate if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se influence the teachers' professional development. Lektion.se as a potential online learning community for shared teacher professional development is touched upon in the end of the paper.

Introduction

Due to constant change in the working conditions and due to the impact that information and communication technologies (ICT) have in practice, teachers' continuously require professional development. They must be prepared to meet the demands from their workplaces in school and their knowledge and skills are therefore in a constant need of improvement. The Internet gives rich opportunities for teachers who share the same interests and goals to meet and discuss within the context of so-called online learning communities (OLCs) (Carlén & Jobring, 2007; Lindberg & Olofsson, 2008; Olofsson, 2007; Olofsson & Lindberg, 2007). Such are often informal (Fraser et al., 2007) to its character and initiated and sustained by the members themselves (Henderson, 2007). In this paper, one of the largest Swedish informal OLC related to issues about school and its practice, called lektion.se, is examined and some early findings from an ongoing larger study aimed at understanding teachers' use of lektion.se for their professional development is presented. More precisely, the purpose in this paper is to investigate if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se influence the teachers' professional development. In the paper, the concepts of community and teacher professional development (TPD) are discussed. They will be described, related and applied when discussing the early findings.

Background

In Sweden it seems to be a tradition that the government provides overall directions for the content, organisation and purpose of TPD. One of the latest example is the so-called “Lärarlyftet” (Lifting up the teachers) (The Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, 2007) for which the Swedish government has set aside SEK 2.8 to 2.9 billion for the period 2007–2010 to permit teachers, to receive 80 per cent of their current pay while they participate in higher education. Such initiatives have seen some criticism. According to Diaz-Maggioli (2004) this kind of governmental and formal driven TPD is often constricted by a number of barriers. Diaz-Maggioli formulates it in terms of top-down decision making characterised by a lack of ownership of the professional development process. Furthermore, it is hampered by inaccessibility of professional development opportunities and little or no support in transferring professional development ideas to the classroom (see also for example Bishop & Denleg, 2006; Garet et al., 2001; and Loxley et al., 2007). Lektion.se, reported on in this paper, is understood as being informal and as a move away from TPD-barriers such as top-down decision making and little or no support in transferring professional development ideas to the classroom. A move towards adapting the meaning associated with the concept of learning community linked to TPD. In the next section the concept of community will be described and connected to the Internet.

Some Notions about the Concept of Community

Sergiovanni (1999) posed the question: “what is the story of community?” (p. 9). In this paper the answer is in line with Selznick (1996) who implies that different possible meanings and understandings of community seems to be constructed within social, cultural and societal frameworks and shall therefore accordingly not be seen as a fixed entity possible to understand only in a certain way. Such an understanding seems possible to find also in the writings of Wenger (1998) and his idea of the learning community. Wenger (1998) has elaborated upon the idea of the learning community within his concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). A community is defined as “a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence” (p. 5). The learner must, Wenger claims, have the possibility to participate in a community in order to create meaning and understanding through a process of negotiation. Members in a learning community are understood as connected to each other by their joint participation in the negotiation of meaning and the development of a shared history. The negotiation of meaning is considered to be under constant influence of two reciprocal processes — participation and reification. Wenger talks about these processes as the foundation for a shared practice, a source of coherence of the community.

Further there are three dimensions of a practice that forms the properties of a community — mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement represents an engagement characterised by the idea of encouraging diversity, specialisation and different relations among the members. Joint enterprise relates to collective processes of negotiation in which the members together takes responsibility for defining what they are striving for to succeed through their participation in the community. Shared repertoire is understood as resources that supports mutual engagement and joint enterprise over time. It could be collective routines, words, tools, symbols and so on. The longer time the members have been part of the community the more important becomes the idea of a shared repertoire. Wenger's theoretical ideas seem to be productive when investigating the OLC for TPD in focus here, lektion.se.

The Learning Community Goes Online

During recent years much has been written about OLCs (Carlén & Jobring, 2005; Olofsson & Lindberg, in press; Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004), the idea of the learning community going online. One feature seem central in relation to the OLC, concerns the question of how to create feelings of belonging in the community (Olofsson, 2007). When creating a joint group identity, characteristics are founded in negotiated meanings integrated in the practice of the community (Schwier, Campbell, & Kenny, 2004). That is; fundamental to the members of an OLC is to share, for example, history, ideas and values that makes possible and creates mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). All these seem to be elements crucial to the concept of OLC in relation to the practice of TPD online. In the following TPD will be described more thoroughly and intertwined with the ideas of both learning community and OLC.

Teacher Professional Development

In research literature TPD seems to be conceptualised and discussed in various ways. In the following section some of those ways are described. Starting point will be some understandings that are related neither to community nor to the Internet. Thereafter understandings of TPD related to first community and then secondly to the Internet are provided.

Teacher Professional Development — Some Observations Done

Bransford, Brown and Cocking (1999) stress that successful professional development activities for teachers are extended over time and characterized as encouraging for the development of teachers' learning communities. Loughran (2007) put forth that teaching and learning are two complex and constantly

changing activities and for that reason there is a need for teachers of continuous elements of TPD. Rodrigues (2005) provides a somewhat different idea when claiming that TPD is subject to reform in terms of change. Change, it is argued, is a consequence due to three influences: innovation, politics and pedagogy. All of these influences must be intertwined and understood as equal important in relation to each other in order to provide teachers with opportunities to develop professionally and thereby also be prepared to meet new challenges in their everyday workplaces. Finn and Finn (2007) put forth yet another direction for TPD by stating the importance of providing teachers possibilities to critical dialogue and reflection in order to bring in a perspective of social justice into the classroom. They argue that social justice in terms of for example democracy and equity is crucial for teachers to be knowledgeable of and further they claim the importance of that the teachers implement such a perspective in their teaching.

Teacher Professional Development and Learning Communities

One idea concerning learning community and community building among teachers and other stakeholders related to, in broad terms, a school context seems to be that it makes a productive TPD possible. A TPD, one might say, with a potential of being sustainable over time.

According to McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) it is important to both build and support local professional, school-based, teacher learning communities. They also mean that teacher learning communities will improve the work with the students and the students' achievements. Mishra, Koehler and Zhao (2007) put emphasis to the learning community as being a kind of social arrangement. They further promote the idea that learning is located in the intersection of theory and practice, technology and pedagogy, designer and audience. By acknowledging this intersection it is possible to design a learning community that serves as a kind of platform for teachers to learn professionally. Beck and Kosnik (2006) focus in their writings the social dimension in learning and discuss it in relation to faculty members and students, both beginners and students that have worked as teacher but return to the university to study. They argue that building learning community is the single most important means of fostering inclusive attitudes and practices among its members.

Teacher Professional Development, the Learning Community and the Link to the Internet

Barab, MaKinster and Scheckler (2003) point out how online learning communities can work as arenas for building social networks through which participating teachers can share and improve their pedagogical practices. As it seems one core duality discussed by Barab et al. is the challenge to design for an emergent community. A question of not over-designing, to find that minimalist design that allow for a process that foster ownership and participation, design that

is facilitating community as it emerges not as it is designed. In one sense it seems as they here point toward the issue of designing for a facilitation of an informal organisation of online TPD. Vrasidas and Zembylas (2004) put forth similar ideas when discussing the possibilities of designed online communities for professional development. They especially shed light on a critical issue when designing OLCs by pointing to the struggle with their capacities to become and remain a community. That seems to be equal to the struggle of sustainability. The issue of designing for learning community is also dealt with by Schlager and Fusco (2003). They seem to argue for the need to address the potentials of the Internet to support local communities of practice within teacher's work first, before designing for large scalable professional development communities. In local practice they believe they can find the guiding understandings that are prerequisites for designing for communities in TPD.

There are also some more direct critics towards the Internet as a virtual arena for TPD. For example in a recent study, Moore and Chae (2007) found that beginning teachers' use of the Internet was at a superficial level. They found little support for the idea that beginning teachers were searching for community and support through the Internet; rather they used the search engines to get ideas rather than to share their teaching experiences.

Rather many theoretical discussions and empirical studies are concerned with the design of online learning communities for TPD. In this article the participants one informal OLC is the empirical object of study.

Method

In this section, a description of the empirical setting, lektion.se will be provided. The selection of focus group, the method of data collection and what specific data was chosen for this paper are discussed. Before some early findings are presented in the next section, some theoretical notes about the approach used in the paper will be given.

Lektion.se — the Short Version

Lektion.se is the largest online community for teachers, teacher trainees and other stakeholders in Sweden, sharing an interest of different issues concerning, in a broad meaning, the practice of school (lektion.se). It started in 2003 and originally this community was built in order to make possible for teachers to publish, search and download lesson plans. Activities are provided free of charge, are member driven and flexible in time and space. There are different resources provided for the members and in this paper focus is on the discussion forum at lektion.se. The forum contains almost 20 smaller discussions forums and has been available for

the members during the last two years. The discussions in the forums are built up by threaded discussion. As a discussant you have the possibilities to get a notice every single time a new message is written in the forums you follow. Additionally, there is the possibility to create your own page and to create private networks or groups.

Data Collection

This research project is the first done in relation to lektion.se. Previously, its founder has had a policy not to give researchers permission due to the OLCs members' right to privacy and anonymity. This meant that the data collection procedure had to be undertaken in several steps. After contacting the founder and been given permission to conduct the study, an introductory letter together with the links to three online questionnaires were sent. The members of lektion.se included in the project's first data collection phase were then contacted by e-mail, explaining why permission actually was given this time. In this mail the letter and the links to the questionnaires were attached. By doing so no knowledge of those members were nor will be accessible to anyone outside of lektion.se. From an ethical point of view, this is considered a fair deal.

Focus Group and the Online Questionnaire

The request to participate in the study was given to members that had used the discussion forums, comment other members, started new threads, or a combination of the two more than 15 times. In total 170 members and among those both teachers (K1–12), teacher trainees and other stakeholders were within the target group and each of the three groups had a special online questionnaire constructed for them. In this paper the group consisted of teachers is focused.

In order to maintain members' anonymity, it was not possible to allocate any member to a specific group. The situation of not having a well defined and known population in combination with the use of online questionnaires was possible to handle. MacLean and Scott (2007) supports such choice of method in contexts such as this when the researcher will reach a specific group through non-probability sampling or self-selection. Additionally, one might also claim in relation to situations like this that a researcher have to put trust into the members of the OLC, as being carriers of "community values" (Wenger, 1998), to be honest in their actions. In this case to chose and take the specific questionnaire intended for them. Finally it was probably in relation to the focus group choice of questionnaire made a difference that it indeed was the founder of lektion.se that communicated with the members about the project and explaining why he thought it was an important one.

The questionnaire constructed for the teachers contained different themes among those were background information and communication patterns. For this paper

the theme aimed at investigating if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se influence the teachers' professional development was chosen. Before presenting some early findings, it is important to know that the data was analyzed with influences from a hermeneutical approach (Gadamer, 1988). Knowledge is in such an approach understood as dependent on interpretation and is as such always intertwined with some uncertainty. Therefore the intention has been more a question to produce knowledge open to further questions rather than that of producing a single answer (Gadamer, 1989).

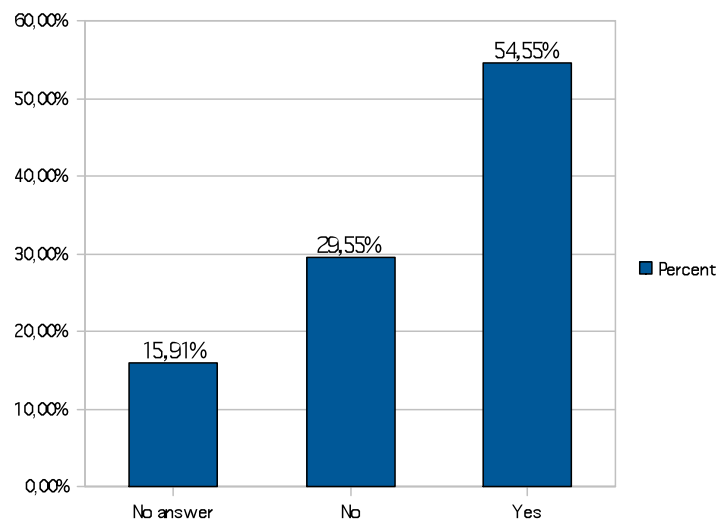
Findings

In this section I will present some early findings from projects first data collection phase concerning if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se influence the teachers' professional development. In total 41 members have answered the online questionnaire constructed in relation for those working as teachers.

The Statements and the Answers

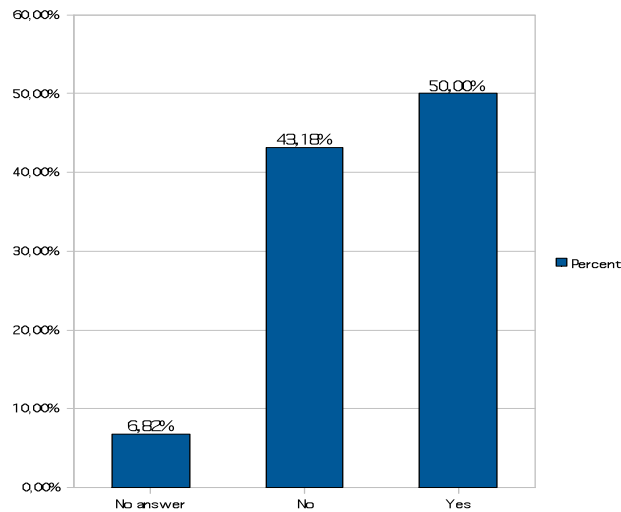
In the first statement the teacher were requested to relate to if the discussions in the forums at lektion.se had influenced their understandings of being a teacher. As can be seen in Figure 1 almost around 55% said yes, 29% no and that 16% chose not to answer.

Figure 1



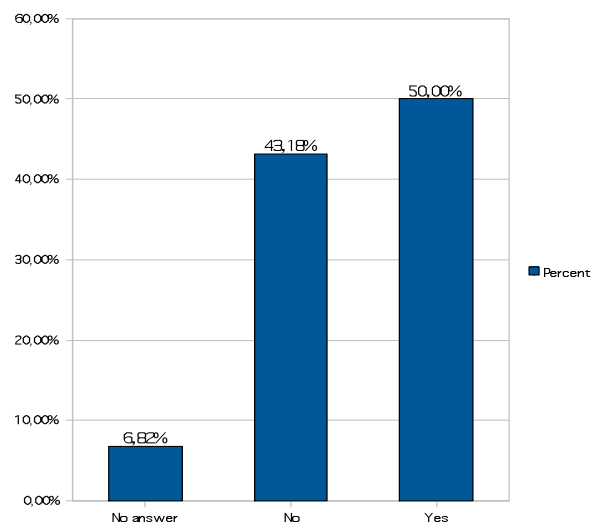
The second statement they were requested to relate to if the discussions in the forums at lektion.se had influenced the way they work as teachers in their classroom. In Figure 2 it is shown that 50% said yes, around 43% said no and that almost 7 % chose not to answer.

Figure 2



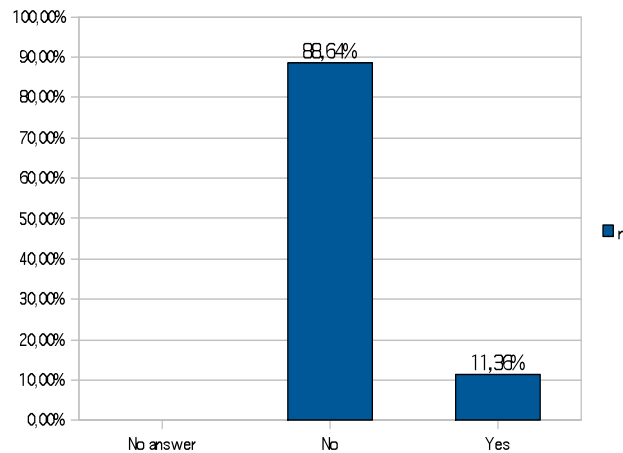
In the third statement the teachers were requested to relate to if the discussions in the forums at lektion.se had contributed to their professional development as teachers. In Figure 3 it is shown that 50% said yes, around 43% said no and that almost 7 % chose not to answer.

Figure 3



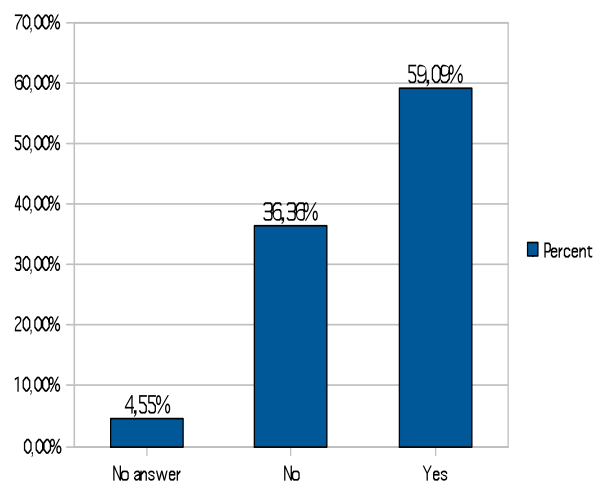
In the fourth statement the teachers were requested to relate to if the discussions in the forums at lektion.se had contributed to further in-service training. In Figure 4 it is shown that around 11 % said yes and that almost 89 % said no and that almost 7 % chose not to answer.

Figure 4



In the fifth and final statement the teachers were requested to relate to if there are school-related issues that they rather discuss in the forums at lektion.se than with their teacher colleagues in their workplaces. In Figure 5 it is shown that around 59 % said yes, around 36 % said no and that around 5 % chose not to answer.

Figure 5



Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose in this paper was to investigate if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se influence the teachers' professional development. In the paper the concepts of community and TPD were described and some early findings from an ongoing larger project about the OLC, lektion.se, were shown. In this final part of the paper a discussion of the findings in the light of community and TPD will be provided and finishing up with some reflections about lektion.se as a potential online learning community for shared teacher professional.

A rather large body of researched-based arguments that address TPD are pointing in the same direction. Namely, it is difficult for top-down, and often government initiated ventures of TPD, to be successful, effective and sustainable over time. It is for example said that teachers taking part in such TPD-initiatives often lack of ownership of the professional development process and that is providing the teachers minimal support when it comes to transferring new ideas into their school-based practice. The same logic seems to be the case in relation to the way the teachers understand their professional roles in school. When consulting the early findings present above in relation to the informal OLC, lektion.se, the picture seems to be somewhat different. Over 50 % of the teachers that took the online questionnaire meant that the discussions had influenced their understandings of being a teacher and about 50 % that the discussions had influenced the way they work as teachers in their classroom. Additionally, issues concerning TPD and how to make the process on-going and sustainable over time likewise seem to be differing in relation to what critics claim about top-down initiatives. 50% of the teachers meant that the discussions with colleagues at lektion.se had contributed to their professional development.

A possible understanding of why this seems to be the case could be that lektion.se serves as a virtual arena in which the teachers can articulate their own areas for development, with what kind of content and with a possibility to integrate the outcomes of the discussions in their own understandings of what it means to be a teacher. Not forced to take part in TPD-initiatives organised in a way that they themselves hardly can influence and with content that probably more matches the Swedish government's political agenda than the teacher's own needs. It seems also to be interesting to consider the early finding indicating that almost 89% of the teachers answered 'no' to the question if the discussions in the forums at lektion.se had contributed to further in-service training. In the light of that rather many of the teachers asked seem to hold the opinion that they are influenced by and developing professionally through the discussions. One possible interpretation here is that the teachers are interested in continuing to develop in their professions

but believe that such (formal) in-service training will offer little that the discussion forums at lektion.se can't.

An interesting reflect upon is how the early findings can be understand when considering that the TPD is taking place within an OLC. The finding indicating that around 59% of the teachers asked rather discuss school-related issues in the forums at lektion.se than with their teacher colleagues in their workplaces supports seems to support this. If talking with Wenger (1998) there are three dimensions of a practice that forms the properties of a community — mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. These dimensions when seem to be productive when applied to lektion.se. The teachers are probably different in many ways but what unities them is their engagement for teaching as a profession, school as an important workplace and their frequently use of the discussion forums at lektion.se. In such an engagement a joint enterprise will be developed, a kind of collective processes of negotiation in which the teachers, not the Swedish government, at lektion.se together takes responsibility for defining what is important and how they shall succeed. In this process they develop a kind of shared repertoire in form of for example collective routines, words and tools. A group of teachers that over time developing a feeling of belonging and that listen to each other, challenging each other, trust each other's advise and so on. They become members of an informal OLC with a potential of functioning as a virtual arena for shared TPD characterised by sustainability over time (Henderson, 2007) and with discussions about the teaching profession that seems to have potential to be transferred into the classroom

Maybe lektion.se can be seen as an OLC in which teachers have possibilities to develop into what Triggs and John (2004) calls an “enabled professional.” That is “one who has the capacity to respond to changing conditions, anticipate future technologies and re-define their practice so that they are enabled rather than constrained by external policy agendas” (p. 427).

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