DISCUSSIONS IN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY FORUMS — DO THEY FACILITATE TEACHERS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract  
Do memberships in online learning communities (OLCs) provide teachers with possibilities to continuously develop, reflect upon, and deepen their understanding of the teacher profession? In this article an informal Swedish OLC, called lektion.se, is examined and some findings from an ongoing larger project aimed at understanding teachers’ use of lektion.se for their professional development are presented. More specifically, the purpose in this article is to investigate if and how discussions in the forums on lektion.se facilitate teachers’ professional development. Lektion.se as a potential OLC for shared teacher professional development is discussed at the end of the article.

Introduction  
Due to constant change in the working conditions and due to the impact that information and communication technologies (ICT) have in practice, teachers are in continuous need of professional development. They must be prepared to meet various demands from their workplaces in school and their knowledge and skills are therefore in a constant need of improvement. The Internet offers rich opportunities for such development. It functions as a place for teachers who share the same interests and goals to meet and discuss, especially within the context of so-called online learning communities (OLCs) (Carlén & Jobring, 2007; Lindberg & Olofsson, 2008; Olofsson, 2007; Olofsson & Lindberg, 2007). Such communities are often informal (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, & McKinney, 2007) in character and initiated and sustained by the members themselves (Henderson, 2007).

In this article, the largest Swedish informal OLC related to issues about school and its practice, lektion.se, is examined and some findings from an ongoing larger study aimed at understanding teachers’ use of lektion.se for their professional development are presented (see also Olofsson, 2008). More precisely, the purpose in this article is to investigate if and how discussions in the forums on lektion.se facilitate teachers’ professional development (TPD). In the article, the concepts of community and TPD are discussed. They will be described, related and applied when discussing the findings.
Background

In Sweden it seems to be almost a tradition that the government provides overall directions when it comes to questions about content, organisation and purpose of national and formal driven TPD. One of the latest examples 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 2.8 to 2.9 billion SEK 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 in various ways been met by some criticism. For example, Merriam (2001) indicates that in many areas of interest adults must be given possibilities to be self-determining in their choice of professional learning opportunities. According to Diaz-Maggioli (2004) governmental and formal driven TPD is often constricted by a number of barriers and thereby restricts such self-determining by teachers. Diaz-Maggioli formulates it in terms of top-down decision making characterised by a lack of ownership over the professional development process. Furthermore, it is hampered by inaccessibility of professional development opportunities and provides little or no support when it comes to transferring ideas constructed due to professional development into the classrooms (see also, for example, Bishop & Denleg, 2006; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Lindberg & Olofsson, 2009; and Loxley, Johnston, Murchan, Fitzgerald, & Quinne, 2007).

Richardson and Placier (2001) support such arguments in a slightly different way when declaring that there seems to be a resistance among teachers to take part in research or to actively use ideas or suggestions by outside field experts. Lektion.se, the Swedish OLC reported on in this article, is understood as informal and as a move away from TPD barriers such as top-down decision making and the issue of providing little or no support in transferring new ideas into the classrooms. In addition it is understood as 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 article the answer is in line with Selznick (1996) who implies that different possible meanings and understandings of the concept 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 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. He talks about these processes as the foundation for a shared practice, a source of coherence of the community. Further there are according to Wenger three dimensions of a practice that forms the properties of a community — mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement represents 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 take 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 have been written about the concept of OLC, the learning community situated in an online environment (see, for example, Carlén & Jobring, 2007; Olofsson & Lindberg, 2008; Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2004. One feature that here seems to be central concerns the question of how to create a feeling of belonging in the OLC (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 make possible and create mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and the development of a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). All together this seems in addition to be elements that are crucial also when connecting the concept of OLC to the practice of online TPD. In the following section TPD will be described more thoroughly and thereafter intertwined with the concepts of both learning community and OLC.

Teacher Professional Development

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

**Teacher Professional Development — Some Observations**

Bransford, Brown and Cocking (1999) stress that successful professional development activities for teachers are extended over time and characterized as encouraging for further development of teachers’ competencies. Borko (2004) argues that in order for TPD to be successful it must focus on developing rather than training the teachers which according to Borko often has been the problem in what she calls traditional TPD. Loughran (2007) puts forth that teaching and learning are two complex and constantly changing activities and for that reason there is a need for teachers to continuously being involved in TPD activities. Rodrigues (2005) provides a somewhat similar 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 equally 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 every-day workplaces. Finn and Finn (2007) put forth yet another direction for TPD by stating the importance of providing teachers with the possibilities for critical dialogue and reflection in order to bring 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 and further they claim the importance of teachers implementing such a perspective in their teaching. Pickering, Daly and Pachler (2007) state that professional development should preferable not come from a top-down model of best practice if, what they call effective teacher professional learning, shall take place. They have in addition constructed three principles to be fulfilled if such learning actually shall be effective:

- the co-construction of shared teacher knowledge through shared practice;
- collaboration through learning networks or communities; and
- scholarly reflection on practice.

In the next section similar thoughts will be further developed when TPD more clearly will be intertwined with the concept of learning communities (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

**Teacher Professional Development and Learning Communities**

One idea concerning learning communities and community building among teachers and other stakeholders related to, in broad terms, a school context seems to be that such embodies a potential to provide possibilities for a productive TPD. A form of TPD, one might say, characterised by a potential of also 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 enhance the students’ achievements. Mishra, Koehler, and Zhao (2007) put emphasis on 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 on the social dimension in learning and discuss it in relation to faculty members and students, both beginners and students who have worked as teachers but returned to the university to study. They argue that building learning community is the single most important factor of fostering inclusive attitudes and practices among its members.

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

In order to be inspired and to get guidance, professional support and feedback teachers in many countries are using online communities (Bond, 2004; Matei, 2005). Vavasseur and MacGregor (2008) support such activities when arguing that online teacher learning communities are effective since they provide an environment for teachers to work together on problems of their choosing that in addition embodies a potential to be related to the teachers’ own practices. Barab, MaKinster, and Scheckler (2003) agree with such thoughts when pointing out that an OLC can work as an arena for building social networks through which participating teachers can share and improve their pedagogical practices (see also Barab, MaKinster, & Scheckler, 2004). One core duality discussed by Barab et al. (2003) is the challenge to design for an emergent community. A question of not over-designing, but of finding that minimalist design that allows for a process that fosters ownership and participation — design that is facilitating community as it emerges, not as it is designed. In one sense it seems that 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 actually remain an OLC. 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 first address the potentials of the Internet to support local CoPs within teachers’ work 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 online TPD.

There are also some more direct critics present in the researched-based literature arguing against the Internet as an online or virtual arena for TPD. Stevens-Long and Crowell (2002) say, for example, that online TPD until recently often was characterized by transfer of face-to-face pedagogy and Moore and Chae (2007) found in a recent study that beginning teachers’ use of the Internet was at a superficial level. According to Moore and Chae there was 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 instead of to share their teaching experiences.
Many theoretical discussions and empirical studies are concerned with OLCs in relation to TPD are offered from slightly different perspectives, as can be seen from the above. In this article, lektion.se, an informal OLC is examined. More details about this specific OLC and the method consulted in this study are provided below.

**Method**

Here, a description of the empirical setting, lektion.se will first be provided. Thereafter the selection of focus group, the method of data collection, and specific data chosen for this article are discussed. Before the findings are presented in the next section, some theoretical notes about the interpretational approach used in the article will be given.

**Lektion.se — the Short Version**

Lektion.se is the largest OLC 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, 2009). It started in 2003 and originally this community was built in order to make possible for teachers to publish, search and download lesson plans. This community has for the moment around 176,000 members; each month, on average, 120,000 unique log-ins and 1,000,000 lessons are downloaded. Activities are provided free of charge, are member driven, and flexible in time and space. While different resources provided for the members this article’s focus is on the discussion forums at lektion.se. This specific OLC contains at the moment almost 20 discussion forums which have been available for the members during the last two to three 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 those forums you follow. Additionally, there is the possibility to create your own page and to create private networks or groups.

**Data Collection**

The study reported on in this article is, as mentioned above, part of a larger research project aimed at OLC and TPD and with specific focus on lektion.se as an online or virtual arena for TPD. In fact, 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 in early spring 2008 and receiving permission to conduct the study, an introductory letter together with the links to three online questionnaires was sent. The members of lektion.se included in the project’s first data collection phase were then contacted by the founder through e-mail, explaining why permission was given this time. In this e-mail the letter written and the links to the questionnaires constructed by the researchers were attached. By doing so no knowledge of those members were, nor will be, accessible to anyone outside of lektion.se. From a research ethical point of view, this was considered a fair deal.
Focus Group and the Online Questionnaire
The request to participate in the study was made of members who had used the discussion forums, comment postings by other members, started new threads, or these in combination more than 15 times. In total 170 members (teachers K1–12, teacher trainees, and other stakeholders) were within the target group. Each of the three groups had a special online questionnaire constructed for them. In this article the group consisting of teachers is focused on.

In order to maintain the members’ anonymity, it was not possible to allocate any member to a specific group or category of stakeholders. 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) support 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 has 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 probably made a difference that, in relation to the focus group choice of questionnaire, it indeed was the founder of lektion.se who communicated with the members about the project and explained why he thought it was an important one in which to participate.

The questionnaire constructed for the teachers contained different themes — among those were background information and communication patterns. For this article the theme of investigation is if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se facilitate the teachers’ professional development. Before presenting the findings, it is important to put forth that the data was interpreted and analyzed with influences from a hermeneutical approach (Gadamer, 1989). Knowledge is in such an approach understood as dependent on interpretation and as always being intertwined with some uncertainty. Therefore the intention has been more a question of producing knowledge open to further questions and discussions rather than producing a single answer (Gadamer, 1989).

Findings
In this section the findings concerning if and how the discussions in the forums on lektion.se facilitate the teachers’ professional development are presented. 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 teachers 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 about 55% said yes.
In 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. Figure 2 shows that 50% said yes.

Figure 1: If the discussions influenced the understanding of being a teacher

Figure 2: If the discussions influenced the way they work as teachers
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. Figure 3 shows that 50% said yes while about 43% said no.

Figure 3: If the discussions had contributed to their professional development as teachers

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. Figure 4 shows that almost 89% said no.

Figure 4: If the discussions had contributed to further in-service training
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. Figure 5 shows that about 59% said yes.

Figure 5: If there are school-related issues that they rather discuss in the forums at lektion.se than with their teacher colleagues in their workplaces

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose in this article was to investigate if and how discussions in the forums on lektion.se facilitate TPD. In the article the concepts of community and TPD were described and findings from an ongoing larger project about lektion.se as an online or virtual arena for TPD were shown. In this final part of the article a discussion of the findings in the light of the concepts of community and TPD will be provided and finishing up with some concluding reflections about lektion.se as a potential OLC for shared TPD.

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. Teachers taking part in such TPD-initiatives often lack ownership over the professional development process and are provided minimal support when it comes to transferring new constructed ideas into their school-based practices. The same logic seems to be the case in relation to formal TPD and its potential to influence or change the way teachers understand their professional roles in school. When putting such research-based arguments in relation to the findings from the study reported on here the picture appears to be somewhat different.
Over 50% of the teachers who took the online questionnaire said that the discussions had influenced their understandings of being a teacher and 50% that the discussions had influenced the way they work as teachers in their classrooms. Additionally, issues concerning TPD and how to make the process ongoing and sustainable over time likewise seem to be differing in relation to what critics claim about top-down TPD initiatives. In fact 50% of the teachers said that the discussions with colleagues in the forums at lektion.se had contributed to their professional development over time.

A possible understanding of why this seems to be the case could be that lektion.se actually serves as an online or virtual arena in which the teachers can articulate their own areas for professional development, determining the content and with a possibility to integrate the outcomes of the discussions in their own understanding of what it means to be a teacher — rather than being 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 and rhetoric than the teacher’s own needs. It is also interesting to consider the specific 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. The reason for such a consideration is that rather many of the teachers asked in the study seem to hold the opinion that they are influenced by and developing professionally through discussions in the forums. One possible interpretation is that those 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.

One issue that in addition is interesting to reflect upon here is that this form of TPD is happening over the Internet and within an OLC. The finding indicating that about 59% of the teachers would rather discuss school-related issues in the forums at lektion.se than with their teacher colleagues in their workplaces seems to support a conclusion that the online setting in fact is of importance — that the teachers have access to and continuously use the OLC for discussing with each other issues related to their own workplaces. In addition, it seems possible to conclude that those kinds of discussions are productive. If not, one might ask why the teachers do not more frequently consult the colleagues at their work places than actually seems to be the case here. One way to understand this can be by using Wenger (1998) and his theoretical concept of community. Three dimensions of a practice form the properties of a community — mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. These dimensions seem to be productive when applied to the discussions taking place in the forums at lektion.se. The teachers are probably different in many ways but what unites them is their engagement for teaching as a profession, school as an important workplace, and their frequent use of the discussion forums at lektion.se. In such an engagement a joint enterprise will be developed, a kind of collective process of negotiation in which the teachers present at lektion.se, not the Swedish government, take joint responsibility for defining what is important and how they shall succeed in order to continue to develop professionally. In this process they develop a kind of shared repertoire in form of, for example, collective routines, words and tools. A group of teachers who over time develop a feeling of belonging, listen to each other, challenge
each other, trust each other’s advice and so on. They become members of an informal OLC with the potential of functioning as an online or virtual arena providing discussion forums that facilitate a shared TPD characterised by sustainability over time (Henderson, 2007). Further, these discussions about the teacher profession seem 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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References


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