

ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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Introduction

Utilizing online resources has become second nature to art educators since the internet became easily accessible in our classrooms. We can use the internet in the art classroom to engage our students, share information with our students, and find inspiration and visual resources for our students. But what can *we* as art educators learn from the internet? More particularly, how can we utilize the internet to develop professionally, form learning communities, and grow our profession as a whole? Art educators are often faced with isolation within their school buildings as either the only art educator or one of a small team of individuals. Because we are the minority in a typical public school, the uniqueness and specialization of the art classroom results in the neglect of the professional development of the art educator. We therefore have developed ways of connecting to each and seeking relevant and applicable professional development. We began with monthly periodicals, conferences, and workshops that required physical travel, demands on personal and professional time, and monetary support (Fulgestad, 2011). However, now by utilizing the internet and social media we can “support professional learning through the development of like-minded communities not geographically or temporally constrained” (Luehmann and Tinelli, 2008, p. 323). Art educators are no longer isolated, we can connect almost instantaneously and across the world with the utilization of online platforms like Twitter, Facebook. Blogs, and Instagram. As we are becoming less and less alienated from each other we must consider the difference between casual social media usage and the development of learning communities and how it serves our own professional teaching practice and the profession of art education.

Social Media vs. Online Learning Communities

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Roland (2010) suggests that “the web has evolved into a powerful platform offering a rich array of Web-based applications that may be used for... forming social networks” (p. 21). Among these Web-based applications are common social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, and LinkedIn. Most educators are familiar with each of these platforms because of personal use to connect with loved ones, friends, or to follow current events. However, these social media platforms are connecting art educators more so than any conference or workshop can possibly fathom. Rather than merely utilizing social media to entertain oneself or to connect with friends, social media can be utilized to create a professional learning community in an online space. Creating these spaces requires consistent participation by an active community (Overby 2009). Active social media learning communities should be a place where mentorship and professional encouragement occurs by facilitating a discussion between like-minded individuals and groups that can share common norms and teaching practice to promote a community of professional learning (Leuhmann, 2008). Because we art teachers are often overlooked when considering applicable professional development, we must begin to utilize our online learning communities to facilitate our own self-directed professional development. For example, the “Art Teachers” page on Facebook’s mission is “to provide a platform for professional dialogue and collaboration in Art Education around the world” (Art Teachers, 2017). If one were to create a post in the “Art Teachers” page asking how best to manage clay in the elementary classroom, you would receive a multitude of advice from a variety of individuals out of the group’s current member count of 16,109. Therein lies the difference between social media usage and social media usage to develop an online learning community. Utilizing the collective knowledge of your peers in order to grow your own teaching

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practice with almost immediate feedback is the most useful utilization of social media for art educator (Castro, 2011).

Duncum (2014), while analyzing the opportunity for YouTube to engage art students, also addresses “the separation between student culture and teacher culture” (p. 35) when considering the usefulness of YouTube in the purpose of contributing to the collective knowledge of society and building a responsibility *for* society. While Duncum (2014) is advocating for student engagement in YouTube production, I think he addresses a valid point about the utilization of YouTube, or any social media outlet, as a chance for online creators to contribute to the collective knowledge of society thereby taking responsibility for the societal evolution by providing personal input and perspective. As art teachers, who teach in a society that is constantly questioning our validity in the contemporary classroom. We should be sharing successes and failures in our classrooms in order to contribute to the collective knowledge of our profession and take responsibility of the future of art education by contributing to online learning communities on social media platforms.

Connection and Community Diversity

Art educators know too well the special intricacies and characteristics of a successful art classroom. We are singletons in our school buildings with a unique set of skills with which to teach our students about their world. However, while we understand these unique factors that contribute to the appearance of an art classroom it is often misunderstood by other teachers or administration. When switching from a high school with an established art program to an elementary school that had never had an art program, I discovered that some educators find the socialization and creativity that flows in the art room to be disorganized and chaotic. Therefore, when I sought help from other classroom teachers about classroom management, or particular

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students they offered the best advice they had, but it was advice that did not function in the realm of the art classroom. Therefore, I turned to my online learning community of art educators that produced content on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. I found that not having to explain what I do in my classroom before describing what was going on in my classroom was one of the greatest reliefs in having an accessible online community of art educators. Having the opportunity to share my experiences with other art teachers and be *understood* by like-minded peers allowed a sense of comradery to develop in an online space with teachers I had never met.

Blayone, vanOostveen, Barber, DiGiuseppe, and Childs (2017) describe a model of online learning called the Fully Online Learning Community (FOC). This model was developed to transition online learning models in higher education institutions to prepare students for a digitized and globalized society. The FOC model strives to create a community of trust, openness, and safety to promote critical reflection, critical thinking and problem solving, engagement, collaboration, and self-dialogue to promote transformative learning (Blayone et al., 2017). This model of a Fully Online Learning Community, while being laid out in such a way that leads participants into transformative learning, is remarkably similar to existing online learning communities without institutional affiliation. For example, the website *theartofed.com*, strives to connect art educators, promote critical reflection and collaboration, as well as promote engagement in our profession through workshops and webinars. Is this not already a Fully Online Learning Community? I would argue the same about the Art Teachers Facebook page or even YouTube channels that promote active discussion, reflection, critical thinking, and engagement.

All the online learning communities aforementioned value diversity and the varied experiences of art educators. Luo, Sickle and Cheng (2017) in their study of students who

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utilized Twitter to build professional learning communities found that “students reported exposure to widely differing views in a safe environment, which enabled them to examine issues through multiple perspectives” (p. 231) and “were able to receive advice and feedback from a broader community of educators” (p.232). Taylor (2016) states that “experience... forms the basis for habitual expectations (ideologies, beliefs, values), creating the lens from which learners perceive, interpret and make meaning of their world” (p. 21). Taylor (2016) is implying that our gathered experiences in the classroom or prior to our teaching experience dictate how we view the world around us and how we teach our students. Therefore, each educator is unique in his or her approach to educating their students because they are a product of their unique gathered experiences. Because each educator has a unique perspective as a result of their experiences, each educator possesses something of value to contribute to the profession as a whole. If we, as a profession, combine our collective knowledge and perspectives of the world in an online learning community that is meant for sharing and learning for self-transformation, will we not all benefit and become transformed? This self-transformation, as explained by Taylor (2016), is the analysis of what motivates educators to become better or to remain stagnant. However, in active and *engaged* online learning communities and social media groups, we have the power, responsibility, and pleasure of sharing with our peers in safe, reflective and transformative learning with our colleagues from abundantly different experiences and perspectives. Manca and Raniere (2015) state that the general goals of the online learning community of educators are “to share teaching practices, to build a repository of activities and to develop a common identity” (p.615).By participating in any online learning communities for educators we are working on bettering our community as a whole rather than just seeking self-transformation and growth.

Self-Reflection and Documentation of Growth

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Online learning communities and social media utilization for professional growth can provide ample opportunities to self-reflection on teaching practices and provide a chronological documentation of professional growth. Taylor (2016) states that through critical reflection, and reflection on feelings and experience “a teacher begins to think about her students differently and about her role as an educator” (p. 18-19). Therefore, critical self-reflection in education is an invaluable tool in professional growth. Social media and online learning communities that exist therein provide a space for educators to post about classroom successes or failures, or to pose questions to their peers that may highlight areas for growth within a teaching practice. Platforms such as Facebook or twitter promote reflection and community interaction by providing art educators a space for quick, immediate documentation of professional learning or classroom occurrences. Delacruz (2011) calls this shortened, rapid type of social media interaction micro-blogging. She finds micro-blogging to be effective in her professional development because she can learn at her own pace and decide how much time, if any she chooses to invest in these communities while still reflecting and documenting professional learning.

Blogs, however, are more time restrictive because they usually involve more time writing and reflecting. Ciampa and Gallagher (2015) describe blogging as a place for teachers to have the opportunity “to engage as learners, build pedagogical and content knowledge, co-construct and enact new visions of practice in a collaborative setting...where a greater understanding of meaning making can be gained” (p. 885). Blogging and social media posts allow art educators the chance to digest and respond to situations and occurrences in our classrooms. For example, we can struggle with clean-up procedures, write about what happened and what went wrong in a lesson, consider changes, and then receive feedback from peers all in one sphere of reflection. Luehmann (2008) conducted an extensive study of the *Ms. Frizzle* science education blog that

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focused on the posts of a blogger utilizing the online pseudonym of Ms. Frizzle. She describes how the blog allowed the teacher to “engage in deep and thoughtful arguments around the dilemmas and issues with which she was wrestling” (p. 319) and “provided a place for [her] to work out [her] ideas through reflective writing” (p. 329). Ms. Frizzle’s consistent and long-term posting on the blog allowed her to “reflect on her experiences with the goal of improving her practice but also enabled her to generalize from these experiences to wrestle with important issues and articulate new insights and resolutions that affected her understandings, beliefs, vision, and dispositions” (Luehmann, 2008, p. 330).

Critical reflection, as a component of transformative learning theory, while imperative to individual growth, according to Taylor (2016) can often be separated from emotions that result in critical reflection. Teacher emotions are the motivating force behind critical reflection because they define what it is a teacher longs to retain, alter, improve, or eliminate moving forward (Taylor, 2016). Having a safe community with which to discuss and examine our emotions regarding our profession, help maintain a positive attitude towards teaching, as well as identify areas for growth and transformation. Hofsess, Shields, and Wilson (2018) had their pre-service art education students, in tandem with their curriculum on learning to develop effective lesson plans, utilize the social media platform Tumblr as the “home for [their] collaborative documentation” (p.24) and reflection. They found that through active reflection on teaching practices, students began to develop more self-awareness, openness to “generatively falter and become confused, while also encouraging flexibility, resilience, and imagination” (p.28) in their teaching practice.

Hofsess, Shields, and Wilson (2018) state that their “preservice teachers reflected on the importance of allowing the lesson plan to move and breath with students, requiring teachers to

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shift their initial visions of how things might go” (p.28). As educators I think we can all find the similarity of this statement to our own teaching practices. We have to allow ourselves to reflect and grow along with our students and change our ideas of the teacher we thought we would be, and instead adapt to the teacher we should be for the students in our present experience (Taylor, 2016). Finding a supportive, safe, and productive online learning community that promotes self-reflection and self-reinvention in the field of art education can strengthen our profession as we motivate each other to keep evolving along with our students.

Knowledge Dissemination and Acquisition

While feeling connected to a community of fellow art educators in an online learning community might promote critical self-reflection and transformative learning (Taylor 2016), we still develop and participate in art education online learning communities via social media, videos, or blogs because we desire to increase our professional knowledge of art and art education. When you are part of an art education major program in college you are usually pushed to sample as many types of art making as possible so that you are fit to teach any area of the arts and can therefore adapt to any teaching position. While this is great in theory, I have found that knowing a little about everything art related is both beneficial and disadvantageous. While we are comfortable working with a variety of media and equipment, we still find ourselves in situations where we must fill gaps in our professional knowledge. Online learning communities allow us to consult with colleagues around the world to fill those gaps in our knowledge and drive our own professional development.

As previously mentioned the Facebook Page “Art Teachers” boasts approximately 16,000 members that span across the globe. Therefore, in the case of the “Art Teachers” page, we have surpassed a small online learning community, but instead have forged a global network of art

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educators that have built a collective knowledge from which we can all benefit. For example, from these fellow art educators we can get help identifying equipment, learning techniques, or receive feedback on which brand of acrylic paint is superior in the high school classroom based on budget and opacity. Castro (2012) states that “Learning occurs at multiple scales, from the individual to the collective, in complex systems. The individuals and the collective community of participants [act] as a learning system, adapting, shaping, and being shaped by each other” (p. 158). Essentially, we art educators are creating a complex system of learning, and as such we are creating a shared bank of knowledge that is greater than our individual knowledge, and we in turn are shaping the profession of art education by providing feedback and skills to each other via online learning communities and social media platforms.

It is relatively easy to consume information from online learning communities through simple searches on Facebook pages or via Twitter hashtags. However, we must consider the part of the content producer and decide what our role will be in our online learning communities: mere consumer, producer, or a combination of both? Some users of social media use it as a platform to broadcast information and collect a following while others utilize social media to make connections (Moreillon, 2016). While there is much to be said about the capitalization that occurs on social media accounts that have gained large followings, there are still many educators that produce content for the purpose of sharing and gaining knowledge within their field. Moreillon (2016), a librarian and another example of a single-person-department in a school that often gets overlooked for applicable and pertinent professional development, urges professionals to build their online learning communities by commenting on posts, sharing information with colleagues, writing blog posts, and becoming a lifelong learner and leader within your field.

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Thus, she encourages educators to take charge of their own professional development and push themselves to build on their professional knowledge by actively participating in an online learning community. By sharing challenges and solutions within our online learning communities we are self-directing our own professional development through an online platform that encourages a “community-based approach to professional learning” (Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2014, p. 5). Being able to direct our own professional development as needed, without the assistance of our administration, and as rapidly as online learning networks will allow, gives us access to the collective professional knowledge in our field. Becoming part of an online learning community not only allows art educators to benefit from the collective knowledge of the community, but it also requires contribution and collaboration for the community to thrive. One must consume information as needed, but also consider what knowledge one has to share to better the community.

Conclusion and Moving Forward

Learning to utilize and participate in online learning communities is undoubtedly beneficial for the art educator. Art educators are often overlooked for professional development opportunities because we make up such a small minority in our schools. We can also feel isolated from our colleagues because there are often only one or a small handful of peers with which to collaborate. Therefore, in order to continue our own professional growth and development we must seek out our own opportunities for growth. Online learning communities provide art educators with a diverse community of educators that can support, challenge, motivate, and comfort each other without having need to drive to an art education conference or book an art workshop. Critical Self-Reflection is another added benefit to art educators when participating in

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an online learning community. By sharing our feelings, experiences, failures, and successes with our peers we are contributing to the collective knowledge of the group by either creating a feeling of comradery or by offering an opportunity for critical thinking and problem solving through collaboration. While we commonly join online learning communities to seek knowledge from our more experienced art educator colleagues, we often begin to reflect on what knowledge we have to offer our online learning community and also being to contribute to the collective knowledge of the group rather than merely consuming content produced by other teachers.

Moving forward, school systems should give professional learning credits to educators that seek out their own professional development, especially if it's not provided by the teacher's school. Art educators are working together like never before and we are directing our own learning in order to better serve our students. These online communities are not only beneficial to our own professional development, but also give art educators to take on a leadership role amongst our peers through simply sharing the happenings of our art classrooms. Online learning communities provide a unique experience for human connection that has been inconceivable prior to the institutionalization of the internet. As such we have opportunities to practice life-long learning by engaging with our colleagues and to give encouragement by serving as a mentor to other art educators that come from vastly different experiences, educations, communities, and cultures from our own. Online learning communities are about our own personal development, but more importantly, they are about developing the collect knowledge of our profession. Participating and contributing to these communities that are found online via blogs, social media platforms, or video hosting sites are professional development because

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