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Social media in professional development of teachers of business English

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Abstract. Rapid technological changes have greatly transformed the teaching world and put new demands on teachers. The need to keep pace with the developments in education and the world in general makes professional development for teachers more important than ever. Besides traditional conferences, seminars, workshops etc., a lot of new, virtual forms of professional development have emerged recently. The aim of this paper is to investigate and present some of the currently most influential social media that enable business English teachers to improve their practice and take part in creation of professional development programmes themselves.

Keywords. Blog, business English, professional development, social media, Scoop.it, Twitter.

1. Introduction

We live in the world that is constantly changing. Digital revolution that is currently taking place is having a profound effect on all aspects of human life - social, cultural and economic. It has dramatically altered teaching environment and forms and nature of communication, and has consequently led to a new approach to learning and teaching and changed the place and roles of teachers.

Nowadays, many documents emphasize the fact that teachers perform a key role in ensuring students' successful learning outcomes and quality education in general. Teachers also play a great part in carrying out reforms in educational system. Lock (2006: 664) calls them "agents of change in the educational system". Demands and challenges to which 21st century teachers have to respond are increasingly complex. They need to be aware of the highly dynamic nature of the world they live in and keep pace with its developments.

2. Professional development in the 21st century

Professional development has been one of the central issues in pedagogical literature in the past twenty years. The analysis of various books, articles and research papers has shown that the general view today is that professional development is:

- a lifelong task, a continuing process. "Teachers are called upon not only to acquire new knowledge and skills but also to develop them continuously. The education and professional development of every teacher needs to be seen as a lifelong task, and be structured and resourced accordingly" (Teachers' Professional Development - Europe in International Comparison 2010: 12). Mann (2005: 112, taken from Maslach 1982) adds that "sustained teacher development may renew commitment and interest in teaching and thereby help to prevent burnout",
- a bottom-up process, "instigated by individuals and groups" (Mann 2005: 105, taken from Cheng and Wang 2004). The responsibility for professional development has shifted from institutions to teachers themselves.

An important direction in teacher development in recent years has been a movement away from 'outsider' approaches to 'insider' ones. The former are often based on expert knowledge as well as general theories and principles that teachers apply to their own situations; the latter are locally based approaches that encourage teachers to explore their own contexts and construct

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their own knowledge and understanding of what takes place in their classrooms. In self-directed learning, teachers assume responsibility for setting goals for self-development and for managing and controlling their own learning. (Richards and Farell 2005: 13).

- a reflective approach to practice. 21st century teachers are seen as reflective practitioners who are supposed to “subject their own beliefs about learning and teaching to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice (Farell 2008: 1, taken from Farell 2007, Jay and Johnson 2002, Valli 1997),
- a process that encourages collaboration and “knowledge sharing among communities of practitioners, using face-to-face, virtual and blended communications” (<http://www.p21.org/overview/skills-framework>). Many authors, including experts such as Richards and Farell (2005) and Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasize the need to collaborate with other educators because it enhances individual learning. As Darling-Hammond (2006: 6) says, one teacher alone cannot possess all the knowledge needed in today’s everchanging and everexpanding teaching environment.

The 90s of the 20th century saw the rise of online teacher professional development (oTPD), also called teacher e-learning. It first emerged within the professional development system of institutions of higher education, but has expanded in the meantime and become the integral part of teacher education in general. oTPD enables teachers to personalise their own development and choose the professional development path that suits their own “lifestyle, personal preferences and course requirements” (Noble 2010: 20). In other words, “learners are now selecting their own blend of technologies to make their learning experiences more congenial, manageable and appropriate to their needs“ (Noble 2010: 20, taken from JISC 2007: 32). A phenomenon connected with online teacher professional development is networked teacher professional development (nTPD), which Reid and Ostashewski (2010) define as a subtype of oTPD which is “delivered in an online social networking environment that supports and encourages teachers to learn together, both formally and informally, while allowing them to retain control over their time, space, presence, activity level, and relationships“.

Speaking of oTPD in general, Lock (2006: 675) emphasizes that it does not represent the replacement for traditional professional development, but “rather it is about thinking differently about professional development using community model approach where technology provides new spaces to facilitate learning and collaborative inquiry, designed to enhance teaching and learning“.

3. Social media in professional development of teachers

Social media is becoming increasingly present in people’s lives today. It has found its place in teachers’ professional lives as well. There has been some research into the use of social media for professional development of teachers and the following two publications are particularly insightful in this area: *Tweeting for teachers: How can social media support teacher professional development?* (2011) by Julie McCulloch, Ewan McIntosh and Tom Barrett and *SMILE – Social Media in Learning and Education*, a summary of a project conducted from April 2012 to May 2013. Both publications explore the ways in which social media can become an integral part of students’ and teachers’ learning and identify challenges and opportunities that arise in that process. General conclusion is that not only this form of professional development is in line with the above mentioned features of the 21st century professional development, but it helps teachers to familiarize with the virtual landscape as well, and as a result they can become better “equipped to serve the learning needs of their students” (SMILE 2013: 8).

3.1. Social media: definition

In order to understand how social media can facilitate professional development of teachers, it

is necessary to define this term and distinguish it from terms it is often confused with - Web 2.0 and social network.

Although terms social media and Web 2.0 are sometimes used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. Social media has actually developed from Web 2.0 and one “can refer to social media as a Web 2.0 innovation, but referring to Web 2.0 as social media is incorrect because it ignores all its less social aspects, such as blogs, YouTube, and so on” (Beattie 2011). Social media and social network do not denote the same concept either, because social media is a wider term, and it includes social network as its subtype.

In the SMILE project (2013: 12) social media is defined through the list of following features:

- social media challenges traditional models,
- social media allows people to communicate,
- social media allows people to collaborate,
- social media gives people an audience,
- social media services often remove hierarchy and are built from the bottom up,
- social media is open and transparent.

This view corresponds with how authors of this publication perceive today’s classroom. They state that “we need classrooms that challenge traditional models and reverse the hierarchy, allow young people to communicate and collaborate, that provide an authentic audience for children’s work and exist within systems that are both open and transparent” (SMILE 2013: 13).

4. Scoop.it, Twitter and blogs in professional development of teachers of business English

This paper will now proceed with the investigation of the following three social media tools: Scoop.it, Twitter and blogs, with the aim of discovering how they can be utilized by teachers of business English who are trying to improve their teaching theory and practice.

4.1. Scoop.it

Scoop.it is a content curation platform that became available to the public in November 2011. Curation, also known as digital curation, is defined as “sifting and organizing links to useful content” (Peachey 2012). This platform enables users:

- to gather and store content that is of their interest (articles, blog posts, pictures, webpages etc.) in one place,
- to create and share content with other users,
- to develop communities according to their interests.

Scoop.it is based around topics which consist of scoops, i.e. “articles that make up the content of a topic.” (Tschoegl 2012). Users can create their own scoops or rescop from other topics i.e. add content they find interesting to their own topic.

Business English teachers can use this platform to find content that will help them get practical ideas, familiarize themselves with latest theoretical developments and grow professionally in general. By simply entering the key word in the search bar, they will be supplied with a lot of useful information. For example, the phrase “business English” produces topics such as: business English skills, business English teaching texts, teaching business English-useful links, business English matters, technology for business English teaching, business English video and many more. Teachers can choose the topics of their interest and follow the authors of the content. They can also share resources and articles by creating their own topics and thus connect with other educators. Particularly useful tool for managing Scoop.it topics is a Bookmarklet, which can be

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added to a bookmark bar, and which “helps users publish interesting content directly from their browser to their topic” (<http://feedback.scoop.it/knowledgebase/articles/32096-1-6-1-how-to-install-the-bookmarklet->). Since this platform is connected with other social networks, teachers can share their scoops simultaneously on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, WordPress and other accounts, and as a result, become more visible in the virtual environment.

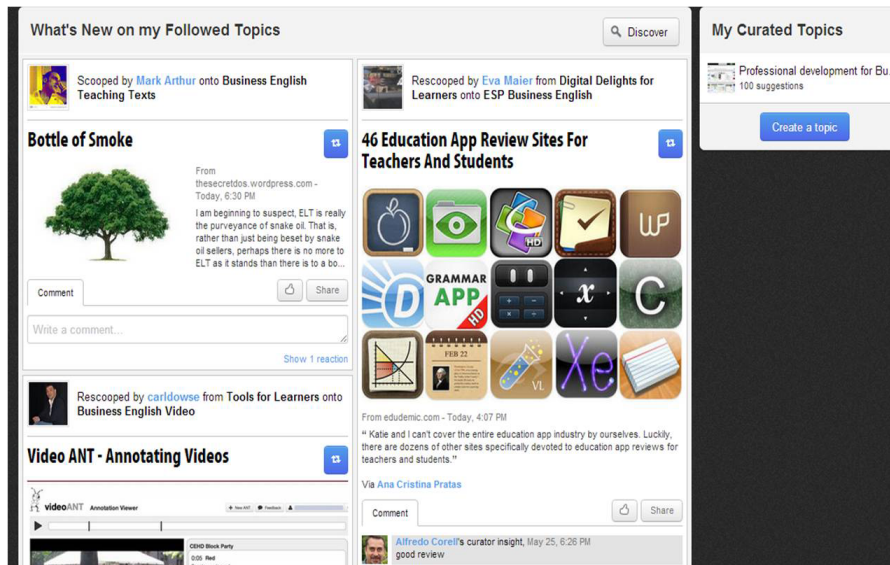


Figure 1: Screenshot of the author's followed topics on Scoop.it account

In general, the more one scoops, rescops and comments, the easier one gets in touch with people who share the same or similar interests, and this can greatly benefit teachers because they may get new ideas and new perspectives on teaching as well as support from fellow teachers. This platform is helpful for less active users as well because it is content-oriented, and, as mentioned above, it can provide teachers with valuable pedagogical resources, both theoretical and practical.

4.2. Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging site based around tweets, i.e. pieces of information consisting of maximum 140 characters. One uses it to keep up to date with the latest news and events, discover topics of his or her interest, share opinions etc. It can be a very useful social media platform for professional development of business English teachers too. They can connect with educators worldwide to exchange ideas related to classroom and teaching practice, i.e. they can find and share links to various kinds of content such as teaching resources, blog posts, conferences and other events, get immediate response to questions and dilemmas, get support when experimenting with new ideas, take part in educational chats and the like.

Hashtag (#) is a symbol that is of crucial importance on this platform and it is used with a particular key word in order to categorise content. It enables teachers to find topics more easily and join in conversations.

Speaking of Twitter conversations which are of interest to business English teachers, one should mention chats such as #ELTchat, #Ukedchat, #edchat etc. Some authors say that they represent one of the “finest examples of how educators have used social media for continued professional development“ (SMILE 2013: 16).

Below follows a short description of what #ELTchat is and how it works.

#ELTchat is “a PLN¹ for ELT professionals” (<http://eltchat.org/>), which combines a few social media forms: Twitter, where the actual chat takes place, and wiki and blog where all the activities that precede and follow the chat are published.

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The chat has a two-year long tradition in offering support and “opportunities for continuous professional development” (<http://eltchat.org/>) for teachers of English. It started when “a group of ELT professionals began to use Twitter to discuss topics of interest to English language teachers” (<http://eltchat.org/>).

As far as topics for the discussion are concerned, they are selected with the help of #ELTchat blog moderators and teachers from all over the world using the online poll system. The teachers are invited to offer their proposals for the subject of the chat, and after being reviewed by #ELTchat moderators, the topics are put to the vote. Two topics are then selected for the chat which takes place twice every Wednesday. After the chat, the transcript is published on #ELTchat wiki. There is also a summary of the chat written by a volunteer participant and posted on his or her blog as well as the #ELTchat blog.

Apart from general methodological issues, business English teachers participating in an #ELTchat can encounter topics that are specific to their field of teaching, such as “How can you teach business English with minimal experience of being in the business world?”, “Job interviews tips” and the like.

Related to Twitter is Tweetdeck, an application whose interface “consists of a series of customisable columns, which can be set up to display user’s Twitter timeline, mentions, direct messages, lists, trends, favorites, search results, hashtags, or all tweets by or to a single user” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TweetDeck>). In other words, this application helps teachers to create a clearer overview of their Twitter account so that they can follow the relevant content much more easily.

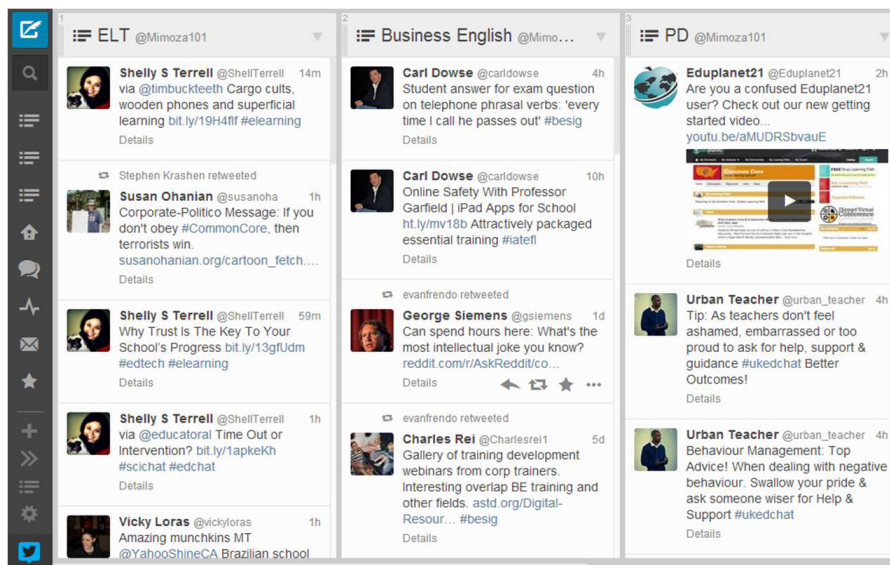


Figure 2: Screenshot of the author’s TweetDeck lists

In order to use Twitter as a professional development platform, teachers do not have to be active members. However, the level of involvement affects the number of followers, and the more followers a teacher has, the more effectively he or she can utilize the potential of Twitter. Otherwise, it can easily become a timewaster.

4.3. Blogs

Blogs are websites that resemble online journals and represent a useful tool for professional development of teachers. In 2008, Luehmann and Tinelli conducted an in-depth research into this area and concluded that “blogging can offer new avenues for professional learning by providing teachers with new forms of participation and unique learning opportunities” (Luehmann and Tinelli 2008: 325). Davies and Merchant (2007: 168) list the following benefits of blogging:

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[...] textual connections with others on and offline; the facility to comment on others' blogposts and the possibility of replying to comments on one's own; hyperlinks to information sources; site meters which monitor visits from others; RSS feeds which alert subscribed readers to other newly updated sites; the facility to embed other texts within one's own and the possibility of including a range of modalities from audio podcasts to video streams.

Blogging practice enhances both professional and teacher identity development. According to Luehmann and Tinelli (2008: 332), managing and maintaining the content of this form of virtual communication impacts the learning and professional development, while the social networking function i.e. interaction through comments helps teachers to develop their identity.

As far as interaction in blogs is concerned, these two authors (Luehmann and Tinelli 2008: 329-330) identified its three types: cognitive, which is mostly found in blog posts and refers to discussing topics such as "pedagogy, students, or other issues related to the field of teaching", affective, which refers to "sharing emotions" or "advocating" and is also found in blog posts, and social interaction, which is present in comments and takes form of "sharing resources, mentoring, encouraging and commiserating".

Below is a list of seven business English blogs² that teachers might find useful for practice improvement and professional growth in general.

- (1) English for the workplace (<http://englishfortheworkplace.blogspot.com/>) is a blog created by a well-known figure in ESP world, Evan Frenedo. It contains the author's conference talks, his thoughts and reflections on current ESP issues, open access resources, and informs readers about upcoming events,
- (2) Business English ideas bank (<http://www.paulemmerson.com/>) is a site created by a recognized teacher and trainer in the sphere of business English, Paul Emmerson. According to Mr Emmerson, the site represents "a free resource for busy teachers wanting practical ideas to use in class tomorrow morning". In addition, readers will find here reference articles, slideshows, videos and the like,
- (3) IATEFL BESIG world blog (<http://www.besig.org/blog/default.aspx>) presents the experiences, thoughts and ideas related to business English teaching. Blog posts are written by guest authors from all over the world,
- (4) Professional English online (http://peo.cambridge.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=9&Itemid=2) is a Cambridge University Press blog, where Bob Dignen, a specialist in intercultural skills, talks about communication, culture, technology, methodology, conferences and the like,
- (5) Business English lesson plans (<http://businessenglishlessonplans.wordpress.com/>) by Claire Hart, an ESP teacher and tech enthusiast offers "effective lesson materials and ideas [...] created specifically for business English learners in mind, but, with a little adaptation and a shift in focus, they could also be used in the general English classroom",
- (6) Talking business internationally (<http://talkingbusinessinternationally.wordpress.com/>) is created by Ed Pegg, a teacher of English to professionals. The blog covers topics related to business theories, classroom management, intercultural communication, linguistics and technology,
- (7) Business English ideas (<http://businessenglishideas.blogspot.com/>) is a blog by Charles Rei, business English trainer, who writes about assessment, classroom management, course and lesson planning, in-company training, communication and the like.

As already mentioned, the blogs above are written by authors within the sphere of ESP and business English. However, business English teachers can greatly benefit from following general

English blogs as well, because these two categories overlap in many aspects, and general English topics can also be of considerable use in business English theory and practice, and vice versa.

5. Conclusion

This paper has given a short overview of some new trends in professional development of teachers and focused specifically on social media and how it can facilitate professional development of business English teachers. The author has presented three types of social media: Scoop.it, Twitter and blogs, which are different in nature, but all provide a valuable learning experience for teachers. The investigation of their content and use has shown that they enable teachers to keep up to date with latest ELT and ESP issues and help them connect and create networks which leads to getting new or different perspectives on teaching and learning and encourages reflection upon one's own practice. In addition, using social media and oTPD in general "provides teachers with an opportunity to engage in types of learning environments that increasing numbers of their students will be or are currently experiencing as part of their education" (Reid and Ostashewski 2010).

6. Notes

¹ PLN stands for professional learning network.

² Due to space constraints and the nature of this paper, the author has narrowed the list of blogs to present down to seven. These are the blogs written by recognized authors and trainers in the sphere of ESP and business English.

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