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The Potential and Limits of Online Communities for Rural Teachers

Nick Kelly and Rod Fogarty

There has been significant discussion in recent years about the use of online platforms to support communities of rural teachers. This presentation brings together the findings of a number of recent studies to discuss the potential and the limits of online communities for rural teachers.

There is an emerging consensus that much can be gained through the creation of a functioning online community of rural teachers. In particular, the notion of supporting collegiality and access to experienced teachers has a well-developed theoretical basis and a proof of concept has been demonstrated a number of times on small scales (Kelly, Reushle, Chakrabarty, & Kinnane, 2014; McLean, Dixon, & Verenikina, 2014; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).

However, rural teachers are engaging with the current generation of online communities in a way that falls short of this potential. Current communities are understood to be a range of large corporate providers (e.g. Facebook, Edmodo), government sites (e.g. Scootle, The Learning Place), institutional platforms (of teacher education providers) and research-led platforms (e.g. BITTT (McLean et al., 2014)).

Six ways in which rural teachers can support one another online can be understood as (following Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014): (1) advocates of the practical; (2) conveners of relations; (3) agents of socialisation; (4) modelers of practice; (5) supporters of reflection; and (6) providers of feedback. Preliminary evidence suggests that the current range of platforms only support 1-3 but not 4-6.

The current range of platforms and communities available to rural teachers is problematised along a number of dimensions. Some platforms offer massive open communities with a great deal of knowledge, but lacking in privacy and trust. Others offer small, trusted spaces but lack the ability to scale easily or to re-use knowledge. The authors posit that it is possible to enable both, through platform design and community development.

Finally, any online community for rural teachers exists within the context of current policy and of recent history. The presentation concludes by posing the question: What could be gained if rural teacher communities, policy and education were better integrated? It responds through a brief discussion of what is known about teacher attraction and retention and about the ways in which the needs of rural teachers might differ to other teachers.

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