

New Literacies: Research for Teachers by Teachers

Introduction

This report gives an account of one professional learning experience offered by the Northeastern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program (NNRPDP) to a group of primary teachers from the Elko, Nevada area. This professional learning experience was designed as an introduction into the theory of New Literacies. These literacies relate to how individuals read, write, and communicate in the 21st century because of the Internet and its continuous state of change (Leu, 2000; Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009).

New Literacies scholars generally agree on four characteristics of new literacies. First, “the Internet and other ICT (information communication technologies) require new social practices, skills, strategies, and disposition for their effective use.” Second, “new literacies are central to full civic, economic, and personal participation in a world community.” Third, “new literacies are deictic; they rapidly change as defining technologies change. And, fourth, “new literacies are multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted” (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008, Kindle p. 14 – 15 of 1306). New Literacies are essential for today’s students and teachers (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008; Lankshear, Knobel & Curran, 2013). Based on this and other current research, it makes sense that New Literacies professional learning become a mainstay in our NNRPDP program.

Supporting the development of New Literacies requires the effective integration of Internet technologies used for both consuming and producing content. Frequently, effective technology integration requires significant pedagogical changes (Ertmer, 2015; Land & Hannafin, 2000; Sandholtz, 1997). Melding new skills and pedagogical changes are accomplished through action research, also known as practitioner research or teacher inquiry, (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Concurrently, addressing teacher stages of concern (Hall, 1979, 2013; Newlove & Hall, 1976) targets the process of change for supporting teacher learning (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

Based on these understandings of teacher learning, this professional learning experience was structured to support teachers as they conduct action research in their classrooms while exploring both teacher and student development of New Literacies. Additionally, teacher concern statements related to bringing New Literacy experiences into their classrooms were collected every three weeks. These concerns provided a lens into each teacher’s affective reality, to be addressed appropriately as teachers advanced in their technology integration work. We called this professional learning New Literacies Teacher Inquiry Community (TIC).

The essential outcome for this professional learning was **teacher and student New Literacies development**. To measure this outcome we explored two questions:

- What happens to teacher development of New Literacies when conducting action research related to the integration of Twitter in their classroom?

- What do the participating teacher-researchers report about their student learning of New Literacies based on their individual action research goals?

Structure of Professional Learning

Five elementary school teachers (four 2nd grade, and one kindergarten) in the Elko, Nevada area signed up to participate in the offered professional learning. These teachers, along with two NNRPDP facilitators, met eight times, in two-hour sessions, approximately every three weeks between November 2015 and April 2016. Typically, the two-hours progressed first with individuals typing their concern statements into a shared Google Form. An open discussion of participant challenges and successes based on research goals and implementation, followed with a 20 minute discussion related to a professional reading assigned the previous session. Next, participants engaged in focused work time ranging from 45 to 60 minutes. During this focus time teachers worked on their research, receiving assistance from the two NNRPDP professional learning facilitators, and each other. Finally, participants shared their accomplishments of the evening and their next steps. Between sessions, participants completed actions in their classrooms according to their research goals.

Each teacher developed her own action research plan keeping in mind the expectation to integrate Twitter into their teaching insomuch that students gained access to New Literacy experiences. Each research plan included a research question and sub questions, the collecting of appropriate data along with determining and implementing appropriate data analyses. Classroom context and unanticipated circumstances sometimes caused researchers to revise their plans. For example, halfway through the eight-session course the school district blocked school access to all social media sites each day between 7:30 am and 2:30 pm. This unexpected change to Internet access caused the teachers to generate creative ways to overcome this barrier and continue to progress with their New Literacy teaching and learning. For some, this barrier changed the amount of work teachers and students could now accomplish through communicating online.

One teacher found a workable solution by using her personal smart phone and cellular data to access Twitter. She would display the class Twitter feed from the screen of her phone using a document camera. From this larger display the class could read and discuss the Twitter feed. Another teacher explored alternative access points to her class Twitter feed. She tried a third-party application that was not blocked by school filters but the Twitter feed display did not include photographs or other images students were accustomed to seeing. This lack of visual cues created a distraction and students lost interest. Relentlessly, this same teacher continued to search for solutions. She borrowed a hot-spot from the NNRPDP but this was not a long-term solution as the hot-spot was needed for NNRPDP facilitators when visiting rural areas with limited Internet access. This teacher finally found a long-term solution with another third-party application that did not compromise the Twitter feed display. These and other challenges and successes were often topics of discussion and celebration during the professional learning sessions.

Note: three points of justification helped to determine Twitter as the Internet space we would use as our New Literacies context: 1) sharing the same social network provides opportunities to

connect among classrooms, 2) using a common language within the community supports cohesive learning, and 3) creating opportunities for Twitter as a personal learning network (PLN) creates ongoing global learning for both teachers and possibly students.

Measurements and results

As stated before, the outcome for this professional learning was teacher and student New Literacies development. Success in meeting this outcome was measured by asking two questions: What happens to teacher development of New Literacies when conducting action research related to the integration of Twitter in their classroom and what do the participating teacher-researchers report about their student learning of New Literacies based on their individual action research goals?

To answer these questions qualitative data were collected from the following artifacts:

- Teacher concern statements collected at the beginning of each TIC session
- Teacher reflection statements from TIC session evaluations
- Teacher completed action research projects

Teacher concern statements were collected at the beginning of each TIC session through a Google Form. Seventy-seven concern statements were collected. These statements were coded for comments related to aspects of New Literacy learning and teaching. Through both etic and emic code category generation, the following six categories emerged: concerns related to

- the research process
- student safety
- parent consent
- access to social media
- teacher learning of new literacies
- the teaching of new literacies using Twitter

Using descriptive statistics, concern statements were analyzed for patterns suggesting New Literacy development.

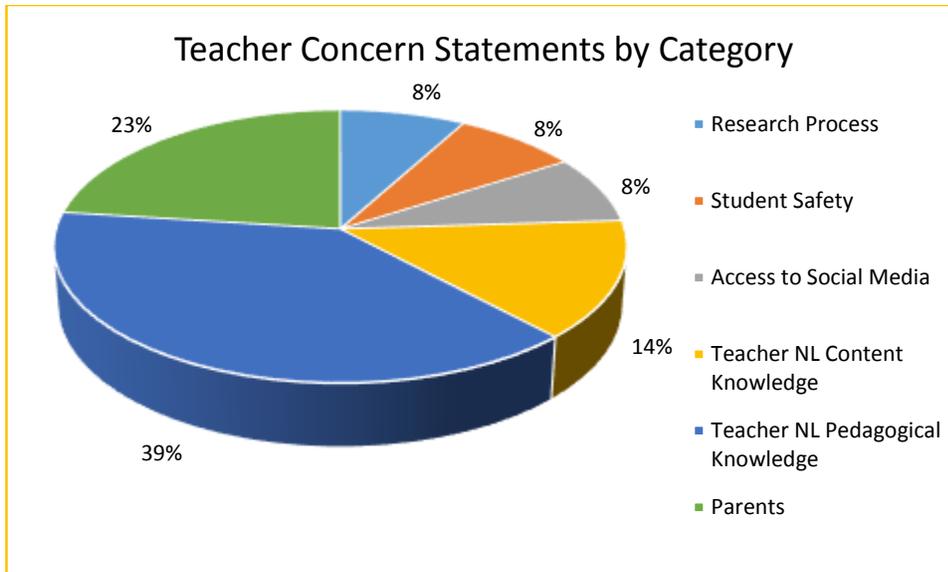


Figure 1: Teacher Concern Statements

Figure 28 shows the majority of teacher-reported concerns relate to the teaching of New Literacies specific to the online social networking space, Twitter. This category has been labeled Teacher New Literacy (NL) Pedagogical Knowledge. Concerns with time management while integrating Twitter in the classroom, how to get started with Twitter in the classroom, and what to have students tweet about are concerns representative of this category. Concerns representative of parental consent included “How do we approach parents who are against Twitter or think that it is pointless pop culture with no place in the classroom” and “I am still lacking about eight permission slips. . . .”

As these teachers gained in their own New Literacy development their confidence for communicating to parents increased. Likewise, concerns related to student safety while using the Internet were appropriately shared and resolved as teachers gained knowledge in cyber safety tools and protocols they could teach their students. The pattern of concerns, starting with issues related to limited New Literacy development and eventually evolving into concerns related to more effective ways of using Twitter may be an indication of teacher New Literacy development.

Teacher reflection statements from each TIC session evaluation were collected at the conclusion of each of the eight sessions. These statements were mined for comments related to aspects of New Literacy development. Any comment suggesting teacher or student learning of New Literacies was highlighted for consideration. From this collection, representative comments were selected to include as evidence. Table 9 provides examples of selected reflection statements.

Evidence of Teacher New Literacy Development

“I have discovered the importance of new literacies in my teaching. I look forward to presenting new literacies to my students.”

“I’m excited to start using Twitter in my classroom and I’m excited for the students to learn how to use Twitter as a form of global communication.”

“From today’s learning I will transfer the use of Lucidpress© into my practice to publish my findings from the TIC.”

“I have an improved point of view on how technology can be used in the classroom. I plan on continuing my research next year.”

“[students] have grown as writers and Internet users…”

“Students will be globally connected by the end of the month!”

“Teaching students about the importance of protecting one’s identity and photos is the next step that I am going to take.”

“Teaching students to exist on the Internet as thinkers and to develop digital citizenship is critical.”

“I am going to teach my students to use polls in Twitter and continue to make connections with other 2nd grade classrooms. My students are going to keep tweeting.”

“Students are taking responsibility in understanding and becoming independent tweeters. They are accountable for their goals as writers.”

Table 1: Teacher TIC Reflection Statements

These statements show both an appreciation for teaching students New Literacies and how the teachers are excited about this learning. Phrases such as “globally connected,” “protecting one’s identity,” “develop digital citizenship,” and using “Lucidpress©,” a web 2.0 tool for creating brochures and flyers on the Internet, all demonstrate evidence that these teachers are developing their New Literacy skills.

Finally, completed action research projects were collected and coded for statements related to student learning of New Literacies. Example projects can be accessed from the NNRPDP website when clicking on the tab “Teacher Inquiry Projects”. These projects demonstrate student development of New Literacies. Example tweets composed by children demonstrating approximate to accurate traditional literacy skills within the context of an Internet space. New Literacy skills are also perceived through the mere fact that students are learning to communicate online. One teacher’s published project reports, “Students as digital citizens are capable of meaningful discourse outside school walls when given the support to achieve it.” This same teacher concluded,

By using New Literacies (Twitter) in the classroom, students were able to connect and engage with other classrooms in meaningful discourse about content and culture. They were also able to engage with professionals to ask questions about their field of expertise.

Images of student tweets to astronaut Scott Kelly and Cayman International School provide evidence for this teacher's conclusions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Presented results argue that a New Literacies Teacher Inquiry Community structure supports both teacher and student development of New Literacies. Emerging teacher-concern data indicated high concerns related to technology integration as they began the inquiry process including their initial learning of New Literacies. Over time these concerns reduced in frequency and changed from technology logistics to more complex technology integrations topics related to appropriate teaching to maximize student learning. In addition, participants admitted their most important discovery during this professional learning experience was the realization of the enhanced learning opportunities for both teacher and students by using Twitter. In the context of this learning community, teachers were motivated to explore strategies, tools, and resources to develop their own New Literacy skills. In turn, this exploration led them to explore creating effective technology-rich learning environments to support student New Literacy development.

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